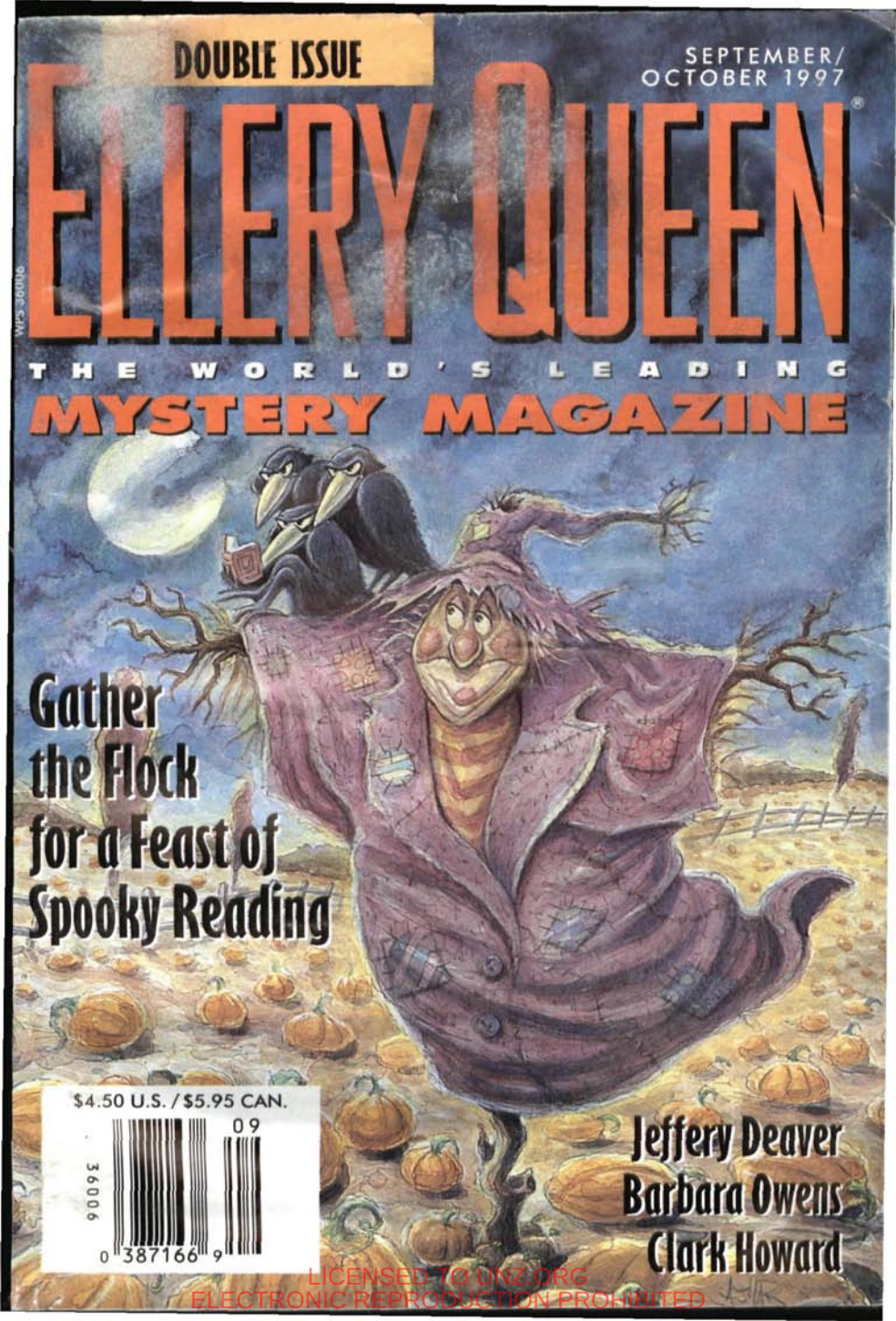
DOUBLE ISSUE

SEPTEMBER/
OCTOBER 1997

ELLERY QUEEN®

THE WORLD'S LEADING
MYSTERY MAGAZINE



Gather the Flock for a Feast of Spooky Reading

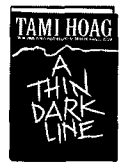
Jeffery Deaver
Barbara Owens
Clark Howard

$4.50 U.S. / $5.95 CAN.
09
36006
0 387166 9

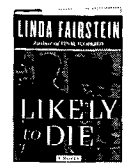
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

4176*
$25.00/**$12.98**

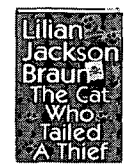
4259*
$19.95/**$11.98**



4184*
$22.95/**$11.98**



4226*
$24.00/**$12.98**



1016
$22.95/**$11.98**

1701*
$24.95/**$12.98**

1008
$21.95/**$11.98**

The evidence points

Examine the best in mystery and suspense–
at the lowest prices–when you join *Mystery Guild*!

4325
$21.95/**$11.98**

0224
$24.95/**$12.98**

1321
$26.95/**$13.98**

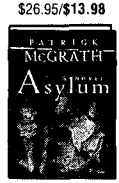
1867*
$25.95/**$11.98**

0240*
$25.95/**$12.98**

1487*
$24.95/**$12.98**

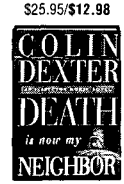
0109*
$25.00/**$11.98**

1313
$21.95/**$11.98**



1263*
$22.00/**$11.98**

3806
$25.00/**$12.98**



2030
$24.00/**$12.98**

1479
$24.00/**$11.98**

SIX REASONS TO JOIN NOW...

1. JOINING IS EASY. Just choose 6 books for 99¢. Your bill (including shipping and handling) will come when membership is confirmed. We'll also send you the **FREE** Shoulder Tote.

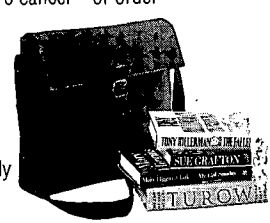
2. YOUR SATISFACTION IS GUARANTEED. If you're not happy with your books, return them within 10 days *at our expense*. Your membership will be canceled; you'll owe nothing. The **FREE** Tote is yours to keep as our "thank you" for trying us.

3. SAVE UP TO 60% off publishers' edition prices. Just pick at least 4 more books at our regular low prices during your membership. Take up to 2 years! Then you may resign membership any time.

4. EXTRA BONUS! Take a 7th book now for $3.99, plus shipping and handling, and reduce your membership agreement to only 3 books. Every book we offer is a full-text hardcover edition, sometimes altered in size to fit special presses.

5. A FREE CLUB MAGAZINE comes to you up to 17 times a year. Each issue reviews the Featured Book Selections plus dozens of alternate books—some are special Club editions you won't find anywhere else. Look for up to 2 special issues a year with super selections and more discounts.

6. ORDERING IS SIMPLE. Featured Selections are sent to you automatically. To cancel—or order other books—mail in your Member Reply Form by the marked date. Shipping and handling (plus sales tax, where applicable) will be added to each order. You'll always have 10 days to decide. If your Member Reply Form is late and unwanted books arrive, please return them *at our expense*.



FREE Tote
with membership

* Explicit scenes and/or language

Prices in fine print are for publishers' editions.
Prices in bold print are for Club hardcover editions.
All prices are current as we go to press.

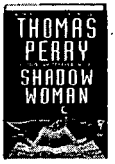
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

4234
$24.00/$12.98

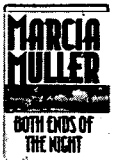
1891
$22.95/$11.98

4424
$22.95/$12.98

1412*
$24.95/$12.98



4432
$21.00/$12.98



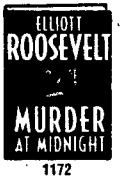
4457
$23.00/$12.98

to *Murder*

Take **6** mysteries for **99¢** with membership

Dr. Kay Scarpetta is back!

2873* $25.95/$12.98



1172
$20.95/$11.98

1511*
$22.95/$11.98

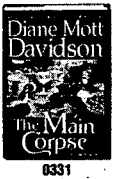
0745
$22.95/$11.98

1719
$23.00/$11.98

1842
$23.00/$12.98

0554
$20.00/$10.98

1289
$22.95/$10.98



0331
$21.95/$10.98

MYSTERY GUILD

MAIL TO: *Mystery Guild*
6550 East 30th Street
P.O. Box 6362
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

Please write book numbers here:

YES! Please enroll me in *Mystery Guild* according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 6 BOOKS I've indicated—and bill me just 99¢, plus shipping and handling. Also, send my FREE Shoulder Tote.

SAVE EVEN MORE! Send me this book now and reduce my commitment to 3 books. Bill me an added $3.99, plus shipping and handling.

(write book number)

88050 34

35

Mr./Mrs. _____

Miss/Ms. _____
(please print)

Address _____ Apt. _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

Telephone, please (_____) _____

Members accepted in U.S.A. only. Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

EQM 9/97

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CONTENTS

"Grandfather's" Gang
Page 42

First Stories author
Nick Schinker

Cover Illustration by
Brian Ajhar

Dell Magazines
1270 Avenue of the
Americas
New York, NY 10020

Note: Indicia on
page 286

FICTION

Double Jeopardy
BY JEFFERY DEAVER 4

Herbert in Motion
BY IAN RANKIN 27

Unmarked Graves
BY GEORGE C. CHESBRO 42

The Bone Jar
BY CANDACE ROBB 61

In This House of Stone
BY JEREMIAH HEALY 71

The Drum
BY DAVID ELY 94

The Deadly Samaritan
BY WILLIAM BANKIER 105

FIRST STORIES

Since My Last Confession
BY NICK SCHINKER 155

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 119

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Medieval Mischief
Page 166

Missing in Monaco
Page 242

FICTION

Wedding Blues
BY MARIANNE STRONG 122

The Mystery That Wouldn't Stay Solved
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 139

Shriving the Scarecrow
BY CLAYTON EMERY 166

Shades of Gray
BY DONALD OLSON 180

Gertrude
BY ANN BAYER 189

The Visitor
BY MONICA QUILL 198

Poisoned with Politeness
BY GILLIAN LINSCOTT 209

The Fruit Cellar
BY BARBARA OWENS 226

Games of Chance
BY CLARK HOWARD 242

POETRY

Corpus Delicious BY PEGGY WYSONG 285

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Mark Evan Walker

DOUBLE JEOPARDY

by Jeffery Deaver

"There *is* no one better."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. What're my options?"

Paul Lescroix leaned back in the old oak chair and glanced down at the arm, picking at a piece of varnish the shape of Illinois. "You ever pray?" his baritone voice asked in response.

The shackles rattled as Jerry Pilsett lifted his hands and flicked his earlobe. Lescroix had known the young man all of four hours and Pilsett must've tapped that right earlobe a dozen times. "Nup," said the skinny young man with the crooked teeth. "Don't pray."

"Well, you ought to take it up. And thank the good Lord that I've any options, Jerry. You're at the end of the road."

"I have Mr. Goodwin . . ."

A twenty-nine-year-old public defender. Unwitting co-conspirator—with the local judges—in getting his clients sen-

©1997 by Jeffery Deaver

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tenced to terms two or three times longer than they deserved. A rube among rubes.

"Keep Goodwin, you want." Lescroix planted his chestnut-brown Milanese shoes on the concrete floor and scooted the chair back. "I could care."

"Wait. Just that he's been my lawyer since I was arrested."

He added significantly, "Five months."

"I've read the documents, Jerry," Lescroix said drily. "I know how long you two've been in bed together."

Pilsett blinked. When he couldn't digest that expression he asked, "You're saying you're better'n him? That it?" He stopped looking shifty-eyed and took in Lescroix's perfect silver hair, trim waist, and wise, jowly face.

"You really don't know who I am, do you?" Lescroix, who would otherwise have been outraged by this lapse, could hardly be surprised. Here he was, after all, in Hamilton, a hick-filled county whose entire population was less than Lescroix's home neighborhood, the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

"All's I know is Harry, he's the head jailor today, comes in and tells me to shut off Regis 'n' Kathie Lee an' get the hell down to the conference rooms, there's this lawyer wants to see me, and now here you are telling me you want to take my case and I'm supposed to fire Mr. Goodwin. Mr. Goodwin, who's been decent to me all along."

"Well, see, Jerry, from what I've heard, Goodwin's decent to everybody. He's decent to the judge, he's decent to the prosecution, he's decent to the prosecution witnesses. That's why he's one bad lawyer and why you're in real deep trouble."

Pilsett was feeling punched into a corner, which was what sitting with Lescroix for more than five minutes made you feel. So he decided to hit back. (Probably, Lescroix reflected, just what had

With his knack for a super twist ending and his flair for suspenseful narrative, Jeffery Deaver has made a success of his writing not only with readers and reviewers but with Hollywood producers. His 1996 novel *The Bone Collector,* soon to be a Signet paperback, will also be made into a movie by Universal Pictures. It will be Mr. Deaver's second motion picture, following *A Maiden's Grave.* †

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

happened on June third.) "Who 'xactly says you're any good? Answer me that."

Should I eviscerate him with my résumé? Lescroix wondered. Rattle off my role in the Menendez brothers' first trial? Last year's acquittal of the Sacramento wife for the premeditated arson murder of her husband with a novel abuse defense (embarrassment in front of friends being abuse too)? The luscious not-guilty awarded to Fred Johnson, the petty thief from Cabrini-Green in Chicago who was *brainwashed*, yes brainwashed, ladies and gentlemen, into helping a militant *cell*, no not a gang, a revolutionary cell, murder three customers in a Southside check-cashing store. The infamous *Time* magazine profile? The *Hard Copy* piece?

But Lescroix merely repeated, "There is no one better than me, Jerry." And let the sizzling lasers of his eyes seal the argument.

"The trial's tomorrow. Whatta you know 'bout the case? Can we get it, you know, continued?" The three syllables sounded smooth in his mouth, too smooth; he'd taken a long time to learn what the word meant and how it was pronounced.

"Don't need to. I've read the entire file. Spent the last three days on it."

"Three days." Another blink. An earlobe tweak. This was their first meeting; why would Lescroix have been reviewing the file for the past three days?

But Lescroix didn't explain. He never explained anything to anyone unless he absolutely had to. Especially clients.

"But didn't you say you was from New York or something? Can you just do a trial here?"

"Goodwin'll let me 'do' the trial. No problem."

Because he's a decent fellow.

And a spineless wimp.

"But he don't charge me nothing. You gonna handle the case for free?"

He really *doesn't* know anything about me. Amazing. "No, Jerry. I never work for free. People don't respect you when you work for free."

"Mr. Goodwin—"

"People don't respect Goodwin."

"I do."

"Your respect doesn't count, Jerry. Anyway, your uncle's picking up the tab."

"Uncle James?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lescroix nodded.

"He's a good man. Hope he didn't hock his farm."

He's not a good man, Jerry, Lescroix thought. He's a fool. Because he thinks there's still some hope for you. And I don't give a rat's ass whether he mortgaged the farm or not. "So, what do you say, Jerry?"

"Well, I guess. Only there's something you have to know." Scooting closer, shackles rattling. The young, stubbly face leaned forward and the thin lips leveraged into a lopsided smile.

But Lescroix held up an index finger that ended in a snappy, manicured nail. "Now, you're going to tell me a big secret, right. That you didn't kill Patricia Cabot. That you're completely innocent. That you've been framed. That this's all a terrible mistake. That you just happened to be at the crime scene."

"I—"

"Well, Jerry, no, it's not a mistake."

Pilsett looked uneasily at Lescroix, which was just the way the lawyer loved to be looked at. He was a force, he was a phenomenon. No prosecutor ever beat him, no client ever upstaged him.

"Two months ago—on June second—you were hired by Charles Arnold Cabot to mow his lawn and cart off a stack of rotten firewood near his house in Bentana, the ritziest neighborhood in Hamilton. He'd hired you before a few times and you didn't really like him—Cabot's a country club sort of guy—but of course you did the work and you took the fifty dollars he agreed to pay you. He didn't give you a tip. You got drunk that night and the more you drank, the madder you got 'cause you remembered that he never paid you enough—even though you never bargained with him and you kept coming back when he called you.

"The next day, when Cabot and his wife were gone, you were still drunk and still mad. You broke into the house and while you were cutting the wires that connected their two-thousand-dollar stereo receiver to the speakers, Patricia Cabot came back home unexpectedly. She scared the hell out of you and you hit her with the hammer you'd used to break open the door from the garage to the kitchen. You knocked her out. But didn't kill her. You tied her up, thinking maybe you'd rape her later . . . Ah ah ah—let me finish. Thinking maybe you'd rape her later. Don't gimme that *look*, Jerry. She was thirty-four, beautiful, and unconscious. And look at you. You even have a girlfriend? I don't think so.

"Then you got spooked. The woman came to and started to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scream. You finished things up with the hammer and started to run out the door. The husband saw you in the doorway with the bloody hammer and the stereo and their CD collection under your arm. He called the cops and they nailed you. A fair representation of events?"

"Wasn't all their CDs. I didn't take the Michael Bolton."

"Don't ever try to be funny with me."

Pilsett flicked his earlobe again. "Was pretty much what happened."

"All right, Jerry. Listen. This's a small town and people here're plenty stupid. I consider myself the best defense lawyer in the country but this case is open and shut. You did it, everyone knows you did it, and the evidence is completely against you. They don't have the death penalty in this state but they're damn generous when it comes to handing out life terms with no chance for parole. So. That's the future you're facing."

"Yup. And know what it tells me? Tells me *you're* the one can't lose on this here situation." Pilsett grinned.

Maybe they weren't as dumb in Hamilton as he thought.

The young man continued, "You come all the way here from New York. You do the trial and you leave. If you get me off, you're a celebrity and you get paid and on *Geraldo* or *Oprah* or some such for winning a hopeless case. And if you lose, you get paid and nobody gives a damn because I got put away like I oughta."

Lescroix had to grin. "Jerry, Jerry, Jerry. That's one thing I just love about this line of work. No charades between us."

"What's charades?"

"Come on, you gonna hire me and boot that Goodwin back to the law library, where he belongs?"

He flicked his earlobe again. The chains clinked. "Guess I will."

"Then let's get to work."

Paul Lescroix's résumé had been amply massaged over the years. He'd gone to a city law school at night. Which wouldn't of course play in the many news stories he fantasized would feature him, so after he graduated he signed up fast for continuing ed courses in Cambridge, which were open to any lawyer willing to pay five hundred bucks. Accordingly the claim that he was "Harvard educated" was true.

He got a job at minimum wage transcribing and filing judicial opinions for traffic court magistrates. So he could say that he'd

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

served his apprenticeship clerking and writing opinions for criminal court judges.

He opened a solo practice above Great Eastern Cantonese carryout in a sooty building off Maiden Lane in downtown Manhattan. Hence, he became "a partner in a Wall Street firm, specializing in white-collar crime."

But these little hiccups in the history of Paul Lescroix (all right, originally Paul Vito Lacosta), these little glitches didn't detract from his one gift—the uncanny ability to decimate his opponents in court. Which is one talent no lawyer can fake. He'd unearth every fact he could about the case, the parties, the judge, the prosecutor, then he'd squeeze them hard, pinch them, mold them like Play-Doh. They were facts still, but facts mutated; in his hands they became weapons, shields, viruses, disguises.

The night before the Pilsett trial, he spent one hour emptying poor Al Goodwin of whatever insights he might have about the case, two hours meeting with reporters, and ten hours reviewing two things: the police report, and a lengthy document prepared by his own private investigator, hired three days ago when James Pilsett, Jerry's uncle, came to him with the retainer fee.

Lescroix immediately noticed that while the circumstantial evidence against Pilsett was substantial, the biggest threat came from Charles Cabot himself. They were lucky of course that he was the only witness but unfortunate that he happened to be the husband of the woman who was killed. It's a dangerous risk to attack the credibility of a witness who is also the victim of the crime.

But Paul Victor Lescroix, Esq., was paid four hundred dollars an hour against five-figure retainers for the very reason that he was willing—no, *eager*—to take risks like that.

Smiling to himself, he called room service for a large pot of coffee, and while murderer Jerry Pilsett and decent Al Goodwin and all the simple folk of Hamilton County dreamt their simple dreams, Lescroix planned for battle.

He arrived at the courtroom early, as he always did, and sat primly at the defense table as the witnesses and spectators and (yes, thank you, Lord, the press) showed up. He mugged subtly for the cameras and scoped out the prosecutor (state U grad, Lescroix had learned, top forty percent, fifteen years under his belt and numb from being mired in a dead-end career he should have left thirteen years ago).

Lescroix then turned his eyes to a man sitting in the back of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

courtroom. Charles Cabot. He sat beside a woman in her sixties—mother or mother-in-law, Lescroix reckoned, gauging by the tears. The lawyer was slightly troubled. He'd expected Cabot to be a stiff, upper-middle-class suburbanite, someone who'd elicit little sympathy from the jury. But the man—though he was about forty—seemed boyish. He had mussed hair, dark blond, and wore a rumpled sports coat and slacks, striped tie. A friendly insurance salesman. He comforted the woman and dropped a few tears himself. He was the sort of widower a jury could easily fall in love with.

Well, Lescroix had been in worse straits. He'd had cases where he'd had to attack grieving mothers and widowed wives and even bewildered children. He'd just have to feel his way along, like a musician, sensing the audience's reaction and adjusting his playing carefully. He could—

Lescroix realized suddenly that Cabot was staring at him. The man's eyes were like cold ball bearings. Lescroix actually shivered—*that* had never before happened in court—and he struggled to maintain eye contact. It was a harrowing sixty seconds and yet Lescroix was glad for the challenge. Something in that look of Cabot's made this whole thing personal, made it far easier to do what he was about to do. Their eyes locked, the electricity sparking between them. Then a door clicked open and everyone around them stood as the clerk entered.

"Oyez, oyez, oyez, criminal court for the county of Hamilton, First District, is now in session. The right honorable Jennings P. Martell presiding, all ye with business before this court come forward and be heard."

Pilsett, wearing a goofy brown suit, was led cautiously out of the lockup. He sat down next to his lawyer. The defendant grinned stupidly until Lescroix told him to stop. He flicked his earlobe several times with an unshackled finger.

When Lescroix looked back to Cabot the metallic eyes had shifted from the lawyer and were drilling into the back of the man who'd killed his wife with a $4.99 Sears Craftsman claw hammer.

The prosecutor presented the forensic evidence first and Lescroix spent a half-hour chipping away at the testimony of the lab technicians and the cops—though the crime-scene work had been surprisingly well handled for such a small police department. A minor victory for the prosecution, Lescroix conceded to himself.

Then the state called Charles Cabot.

The widower straightened his tie, hugged the woman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

beside him, and walked to the stand.

Guided by the prosecutor's pedestrian questions, the man gave an unemotional account of what he'd seen June third. Monosyllables of grief. A few tears. Lescroix rated the performance uncompelling, though the man's broken words certainly held the jury's attention. But he'd expected this; we love tragedies as much as romance and nearly as much as sex.

"No further questions, your honor," the prosecutor said and glanced dismissively at Lescroix.

The lawyer rose slowly, unbuttoned his jacket, and ran his hand through his hair, mussing it ever so slightly. He paced slowly in front of the witness. When he spoke he spoke to the jury. "I'm very sorry for your misfortune, Mr. Cabot."

The witness cocked his head.

The lawyer continued, "The death of a young woman is a terrible thing. Just terrible. *Inexcusable.*"

"Yes, well. Thank you."

The jury's collective eyes scanned Lescroix's troubled face. He glanced at the witness stand. Cabot didn't know what to say. He'd been expecting an attack. He was uneasy. The eyes were no longer steely hard. They were cautious. Good. People detest wary truth-tellers far more than self-assured liars.

He turned back to the twelve men and women in his audience.

He smiled. No one smiled back.

That was all right. This was just the overture.

He walked to the table and picked up a folder. Strode back to the jury box. "Mr. Cabot, what do you do for a living?"

The question caught him off guard. He looked around the courtroom. "Well, I own a company. It manufactures housings for computers and related equipment."

"Do you make a lot of money at it?"

"Objection."

"Overruled. But you'll bring this back to earth sometime soon, Mr. Lescroix?"

"You bet I will, your honor. Now, Mr. Cabot, please answer."

"We had sales of eight million last year."

"Your salary was what?"

"I took home about two hundred thousand."

"And your wife, was she employed by the company too?"

"Part time. As a director on the board. And she did some consulting work."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I see. And how much did she make?"

"I don't know exactly."

"Toss an estimate our way, Mr. Cabot."

"Well, in the neighborhood of a hundred thousand."

"Really? Interesting."

Flipping slowly through the folder, while the jury wondered what could be interesting about this piece of news.

Lescroix looked up. "How was your company originally financed?"

"Objection, your honor," the gray-faced prosecutor said. His young assistant nodded vigorously, as if every bob of his head was a legal citation supporting his boss.

The judge asked, "Going anywhere real, Mr. Lescroix, or're we being treated to one of your famous fishing trips?"

Perfect. Lescroix turned to the jury, eyes upraised slightly; the judge didn't notice. See what I've got to deal with? he asked tacitly. He was rewarded with a single conspiratorial smile. And then, God bless me, another.

"I'm going someplace very real, your honor. Even if there are some people here who won't be very happy where that might be."

This raised a few murmurs.

The judge grunted. "We'll see. Overruled. Go ahead, Mr. Cabot."

The witness said, "If I recall, the financing was very complicated."

"Then let's make it easy. Your wife's father is a wealthy businessman, right?"

"I don't know what you mean by wealthy." Cabot swallowed.

"Net worth of twelve million'd fall *somewhere* in that definition, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose. Somewhere."

Several jurors joined Lescroix in chuckling.

"Didn't your father-in-law stake you to your company?"

"I paid back every penny—"

"Mr. Cabot," Lescroix asked patiently, "did your father-in-law stake you to your company or did he not?"

A pause. Then a sullen, "Yes."

"How much of the company did your wife own?"

"If I remember, there were some complicated formulas—"

"More complexity?" Lescroix sighed. "Let's make it simple, why don't we. Just tell us what *percentage* of the company your wife owned."

Another hesitation. "Forty-nine."

"And you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Forty-nine."

"And who owns the other two percent?"

"That would be her father."

"And on her death, who gets her shares?"

A moment's hesitation. "If we'd had any children—"

"*Do* you have children?"

"No."

"I see. Then let's hear what will in *fact* happen to your wife's shares."

Cabot cleared his throat. "I guess I'll receive them."

Play 'em right. Just like an orchestra conductor. Light hand on the baton. Don't add, "So you're the one who's profited from your wife's death." Or: "So then you'd be in control of the company." They're dim, but even the dimmest are beginning to see where we're headed.

Cabot took a sip of water, spilled some on his jacket. His hands were shaking very nicely.

"Mr. Cabot, let's think back to June, all right? You hired Jerry Pilsett to do some work for you on the second, correct?"

"Yes."

"And you'd hired him several times before, right?"

"Yes."

"Starting when?"

"I don't know, maybe six months ago."

"How long have you known that Jerry lived in Hamilton?"

"I guess five, six years."

"So even though you've known him for six years, you never hired him before last spring?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Even though you had plenty of opportunities to."

"No. But I was going to say—"

"Now June second was what day of the week, Mr. Cabot?"

After a glance at the judge, Cabot said, "I don't remember."

"It was a Friday."

"If you say so," the witness replied churlishly.

"I don't say so, Mr. Cabot. My Hallmark calendar says so." And he held up a pocket calendar emblazoned with fuzzy puppies and kittens.

A wheeze of laughter from several members of the jury.

"And what time of day was he supposed to do the work?"

"I don't know."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Early?"

Cabot coughed. "Not real early."

"'Not real early,'" Lescroix repeated slowly. Then snapped, "Wasn't it in fact evening?"

"Maybe it was."

Frowning, pacing. "Isn't it odd that you hired somebody to do yard work on a Friday night?"

"It wasn't night. It was dusk and—"

"Please answer the question."

"It didn't occur to me there was anything odd about it."

"I see. Could you tell us exactly what you hired him to do?"

A surly glance from Cabot. Then: "He mowed the lawn and took away some rotten firewood."

"Rotten?"

"Well, termite infested."

"Was it *all* termite infested?"

Cabot looked hopelessly at the prosecutor, whose milky face shone with concern, and then at his assistant, who would probably have been concerned too if he hadn't been so confused at the moment. Jerry Pilsett merely flicked his earlobe and stared morosely at the floor.

"Go ahead," the judge prompted. "Answer the question."

"I don't know, I saw termite holes. I have a wood-framed house and I didn't want to take the chance they'd get into the house."

"So you saw some *evidence* of termites but this stack of wood wasn't completely rotten, was it?"

"I don't know. Maybe not."

"So there was some—maybe a lot—of good wood there."

"I don't know." He snapped, "What difference—"

"But for some reason you wanted Jerry Pilsett to haul the entire pile away. And to do so on this particular Friday night."

"Why are you asking me all these questions?"

"To get to the truth," Lescroix spat out. "That's what we're here for, isn't it? Now, tell us, sir, was the pile of wood covered with anything?"

A slight frown. He'd only be wondering why Lescroix was focussing on this fact but the result was a wonderfully suspicious expression.

"Yes. By an old tarp."

"And was the tarp staked to the ground?"

"Yes, it was."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"And you'd put the tarp over the wood yourself?"

"Yes."

"When?" Lescroix demanded.

"I don't remember."

"No? Could it have been just a few days before you hired Jerry?"

Cabot looked befuddled. "No . . . Well, maybe."

"Did Jerry say anything about the tarp?"

"I don't recall."

Lescroix said patiently, "Didn't Jerry say to you that the stakes were pounded into the ground too hard to pull out and that he'd have to loosen them somehow to uncover the wood?"

Cabot looked up at the judge, miserable. He swallowed again, seemed to think about taking a glass of water, but he hesitated; his hands were shaking too badly. "Do I have to answer these questions?"

"Yes, you do," the judge said solemnly.

"Maybe."

"And did you tell him there were some tools in the garage he could use if he needed them?"

Another weighty pause. Cabot sought the answer in the murky plaster heaven above them. "I might have."

"Ah." Lescroix's face lit up. Easily half the jury was with him now, floating along with the music, wondering where the tune was going. "Could you tell our friends on the jury how many tools you have in your garage, sir?"

"For Christ's sake, I don't know."

A sacrilege in front of the jury. Deliciously bad form.

"Let me be more specific," Lescroix said helpfully. "How many *hammers* do you own?"

"Hammers?" He glanced at the murder weapon, a claw hammer, sitting, brown with his wife's stale blood, on the prosecution's table. The jury looked at it too.

"Just one. That one."

"So," Lescroix's voice rose, "when you told Jerry to get a tool from the garage to loosen the stakes you'd pounded into the ground, you knew there was only one tool he could pick. That hammer right there?"

"No . . . I mean, I don't know what he used—"

"You didn't know he used that hammer to loosen the stakes?"

"Well, I knew that. Yes. But . . ." The eyes grew dark. "Why're you accusing me?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lescroix froze and he turned to the witness. "Accusing you? What on earth would I be accusing you of, Mr. Cabot? You're not on trial here. Why are you worried that anyone's accusing you of something?"

"I . . ."

Lescroix let the silence build up until it was unbearable. Then he said, "And therefore, as a result of directing him to use that hammer, his fingerprints are now on the murder weapon. Isn't that the case?"

Cabot stared at the prosecutor's disgusted face. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

Sonata for witness and jury. . . .

"Maybe it's true. But—"

"Sir, let's go on. On that day, the second of June, after Jerry Pilsett had mowed the lawn and loaded the wood into his pickup truck to be carted off you asked him inside to pay him, right?"

"Yes, I think so."

"And you asked him into your living room, right?"

"I don't remember."

Lescroix flipped through a number of sheets in the inquisitor's folder. He stared at one page for a moment, as blank as the other. "You don't?"

Cabot too stared at the folder. "Well, I guess I did. Yes."

"You gave him a glass of water."

"Maybe."

"Did you or didn't you?"

"Yes! I did."

"And you showed him your latest possession, your new stereo. The one you later *claimed* he stole."

"We were talking about music and I thought he might be interested in it."

"I see." Lescroix was frowning. "I'm sorry, Mr. Cabot, but help me out here. This seems odd. Here's a man who's been working for hours in the summer heat. He's full of dirt, sweat, grass stains . . . and you ask him inside. Not into the entry hall, not into the kitchen, but into the living room."

"I was just being civil."

"Good of you. Only the result of this . . . this civility was to put his shoeprints on the carpet and his fingerprints on the stereo, a water glass, doorknobs, and who knows what else?"

"What are you *saying?*" Cabot asked. His expression was even

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

better than Lescroix could have hoped for. It was supposed to be shocked but it looked mean and sneaky. A Nixon look.

"Please answer, sir."

"All right! Yes, his fingerprints were on everything. Or some things. But—"

"Thank you. Now, Mr. Cabot, would you tell the jury whether or not you asked Jerry Pilsett to come back the following day."

"What?"

"Did you ask Jerry to come back to your house the next day? That would be Saturday, June third."

"No, I didn't."

Lescroix frowned dramatically. He opened the folder again, found another important blank sheet, and pretended to read. "You didn't say to Jerry Pilsett, and I quote, 'You did a good job, Jerry. Come back about five tomorrow and I'll have some more work for you'?"

"I didn't say that. No."

A breathless scoff. "You're denying you said that?"

He swallowed, glanced at the prosecutor. "Yes."

"Mr. Cabot, His Honor will remind you that lying under oath is perjury and that's a serious crime. Now answer the question. Did you or did you not ask Jerry Pilsett to come back to your house at five P.M. on Saturday, June third?"

Cabot's eyes swung around the room. His childlike face sweated profusely, his hands squeezed together, a praying schoolboy. "No, I didn't! Really!"

You poor bastard . . .

Lescroix turning toward the jury, puffing air through cheeks. A few more sympathetic smiles. Some shaking heads too, revealing shared exasperation at a lying witness. The second movement of Lescroix's performance seemed to have gone over well.

"All right," the lawyer muttered sceptically. "Let's go back to the events of June third, sir."

Cabot put his hands in his lap like a sullen little boy. A pose the jury reads as purest guilt. Perfect.

"You told the court that you came home about five P.M. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Where had you been?"

"The office."

"On Saturday?"

Cabot managed a feeble smile. "When you have your own business you frequently work Saturdays. I do, at any rate."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You came back at five and found Jerry Pilsett standing in the doorway."

"Yes, holding the hammer."

"The bloody hammer."

"Yes."

"It *was* bloody, right?"

"Yes."

Again an examination of the infamous file. "Hmmm. Now the police found your car on the parking strip fifty feet from the door where you allegedly saw Jerry. Is that what you claimed?"

"It's where the car *was*. It's the truth."

Lescroix forged on. "Why was the car that far away from the house?"

"I . . . well, when I was driving up to the house I panicked and drove over the curb. I was worried about my wife."

"But you couldn't see your wife, could you?"

A pause. "Well, no. But I could see the hammer."

"Fifty feet away's a pretty good distance. You could actually see the hammer in Jerry's hand?"

Calling him "Jerry," never "the defendant" or "Pilsett." Make him human. Make him a buddy of every member of the jury. Make *him* the victim here.

"Sure I could."

"And the blood on it?"

"I'm sure I could. I—"

Lescroix pounced. "You're *sure* you could." Just the faintest glissando of sarcasm. He scanned a page white as new snow, shaking his head. Cabot's eyes fastened onto the deadly report in Lescroix's hand and wouldn't let go.

"Your vision's not very good, is it?" The lawyer looked up. "In fact, isn't it illegal for you to drive without your glasses or contacts?"

"Yes, but I had my glasses on when I drove up to the house," Cabot blurted victoriously—far too pleased with himself.

"Well, sir, if that's the case, then why did an officer bring them to you in the house later that evening?"

"What?"

It was in the police report.

"I don't . . . Wait, I remember. I took them off to dial the cell phone in the car—to call the police. They're distance glasses. I must've forgotten to put them back on."

"I see. You must've forgotten. I see."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Cabot was now as disoriented as a hooked pike. It was time for Lescroix to cut out his heart. He walked ten feet in front of the witness stand, stopped, and turned toward Cabot, who was trying to steady his hands as he took a drink. The jury seemed to be leaning forward, awaiting the crescendo.

"At what time did you leave the office on Saturday, June third?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you arrived home at about five, you claimed. It's a ten-minute drive from your office. So you must have left about four-fifty?"

"I . . . I think I had some errands to run."

"What errands? Where?"

"I don't recall. How do you expect me to recall?"

"But you'd think it'd be easy to remember at least one or two places you stopped during the course of two hours."

"Two hours?" Cabot gasped.

"You left the office at three P.M."

The witness stared at his inquisitor.

"According to the video security tape in your building's lobby." Lescroix indulged himself with a glance at the prosecutor's sweating face and enjoyed the sight of a man going down for the third time.

"I . . . well, maybe I did."

Lescroix opened the private eye's report and found photocopies of Cabot's banking statements and canceled checks.

"Who," the lawyer asked pointedly, "is Mary Henstroth?"

Cabot's mouth hung wide. "How did you know . . ."

Facts, facts, facts, Lescroix might have explained. "Who is she?"

"A friend. She—"

"A friend. I see. How long have you known her?"

The harrowed man's eyes swiveled back and forth. "I don't know. A few years."

"Where does she live?"

"In Gilroy."

"Gilroy's a fifteen-minute drive from Hamilton, is that right?"

"It depends," he began defiantly then gave in. "Yes."

"Now, on June third of this year, did you write a check to Ms. Henstroth in the amount of five hundred dollars?"

Cabot closed his eyes. He nodded.

"Answer for the court reporter, please."

"Yes."

"And did you deliver this check in person?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I don't remember," he said weakly.

"After you left work, you didn't drive to Gilroy and, during the course of your . . . visit, give Ms. Henstroth a check for five hundred dollars?"

"I might have."

"Louder, please, sir."

"I might have."

"Have you written her other checks over the past several years?"

"I . . . yes. But—"

"Just answer the questions, Mr. Cabot. Did you give these other checks to Ms. Henstroth in person?"

"Some of them. Most of them."

"So it's reasonable to assume that the check you wrote on June third was delivered in person too."

"I said I might have," he muttered.

"These checks that you wrote to your 'friend' over the past few years were on your company account, not your joint home account, correct?"

"Yes."

"So is it safe to assume that your wife would not be receiving the statement from the bank showing that you'd written these checks? Is that correct too?"

"Yes." The witness's head went into his hands. The prosecutor threw his pencil down on the table in disgust. He whispered something to his sheepish assistant, who nodded even more sheepishly.

"What was this money for?"

"I . . . I don't remember."

"You gave money to somebody and you don't remember why?"

"Mary needed it. That's all I know. I didn't ask specifically."

"I see. Did you tell your wife you were going to see Ms. Henstroth that afternoon?"

"I . . . no, I didn't."

"I don't suppose you would," Lescroix muttered, eyes on the rapt jury; they loved his new theme.

"Your Honor," the prosecutor began feebly.

"Withdrawn," Lescroix said. He lifted a wrinkled piece of paper from the file; it contained several handwritten paragraphs and looked like a letter, though it was in fact an early draft of a speech Lescroix had given to the American Association of Trial Lawyers last year. He read the first paragraph slowly, shaking his head. Even the prosecutors seemed to be straining forward, waiting.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Then he replaced the letter and looked up. "Isn't your relationship with Ms. Henstroth romantic in nature, sir?" he asked bluntly.

Cabot tried to look indignant. He sputtered, "I resent—"

"Oh, please, Mr. Cabot. You have the gall to accuse an innocent man of murder and you *resent* that I ask you a few questions about your mistress?"

"Objection!"

"Withdrawn, your honor."

Lescroix shook his head and glanced at the jury, asking, What kind of monster are we dealing with here? Lescroix paced as he flipped to the last page of the file. He read for a moment, shook his head, then threw the papers onto the defense table with a huge slap. He whirled to Cabot and shouted, "Isn't it true you've been having an affair with Mary Henstroth for the past several years?"

"No!"

"Isn't it true that you were afraid if you divorced your wife you'd lose control of the company she and her father owned fifty-one percent of?"

"That's a lie!" Cabot shouted.

"Isn't it true that on June third of this year you left work early, stopped by Mary Henstroth's house in Gilroy, had sex with her, then proceeded to your house where you lay in wait for your wife with a hammer in your hand? That hammer there, People's Exhibit A?"

"No, no, no!" The schoolboy raged like a nabbed shoplifter.

"And then you beat her to death. You returned to your car and waited until Jerry Pilsett showed up, just like you'd asked him to do, and then called the police to report him—an innocent man—as the murderer?"

"No, it's not true!"

"Objection!"

"Isn't it true?" Lescroix cried, "that you killed Patricia, your loving wife, in cold blood?"

"No!"

"Sustained! Mr. Lescroix, enough of this. I won't have these theatrics in my courtroom."

But the lawyer would not be deflected by a mule-county judge. His energy was unstoppable and his outraged voice soared to the far reaches of the courtroom, reciting, "Isn't it true, isn't it true, isn't it true?"

While the audience in the jury box sat forward as if they wanted

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to leap from their chairs and give the conductor a standing ovation, and Charles Cabot's horrified eyes, dots of metal no more, scanned the courtroom in panic. He was speechless, his voice choked off. As if his dead wife had materialized behind him and closed her arms around his quivering throat to squeeze out what little life remained in his guilty heart.

Three hours to acquit on all charges.

Not a record but good enough, Lescroix reflected as he sat in his hotel room that evening. He was angry he'd missed the last of the two daily flights out of Hamilton but he had some aged whisky in a glass at his side, music on his portable CD player, and his feet were resting on the windowsill, revealing Italian socks as sheer as a woman's black stockings. He was passing the time replaying his victory and trying to decide if he should spend some of his fee on getting those jowl tucks done.

There was a knock on the door.

Lescroix rose and let Jerry Pilsett's uncle into the room. The lawyer hadn't paid much attention to him the first time they'd met and he realized now that with his quick eyes and tailored clothes this was no dirt jockey. He must've been connected with one of the big corporate farming companies. Probably hadn't had to hock the family spread at all and Lescroix regretted charging him only seventy-five K for the case; should've gone for an even hundred. Oh well.

The elder Pilsett accepted a glass of whiskey and drank a large swallow. "Yessir. Need that after all of today's excitement. Yessir."

He pulled an envelope out of his pocket and set it on the table. "Rest of your fee. Have to say, I didn't think you could do it. Didn't even get him on the burglary charges," the man added with some surprise.

"Well, they couldn't very well do that, could they? Either he was guilty of everything or guilty of nothing."

"Reckon."

Lescroix nodded toward the fee. "A lot of people wouldn't've done this. Even for family."

"I'm a firm believer in kin sticking together. Doing whatever has to be done."

"That's a good sentiment," the lawyer offered.

"You say that like you don't believe in sentiments. Or don't believe in kin."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Haven't had occasion to believe or disbelieve in either of them," Lescroix answered. "My life's my job."

"Getting people out of jail."

"Protecting justice's what I like to call it."

"Justice." The old man snorted. "Y'know, I watched that O.J. trial. And I heard a commentator after the verdict. He said it just goes to show if you have money—whatever your race—you can buy justice. I laughed at that. What'd he mean *justice?* If you have money you can buy *freedom.* That's not necessarily justice at all."

Lescroix tapped the envelope. "So what're *you* buying?"

Pilsett laughed. "Peace of mind. That's what. Better'n justice and freedom put together. So, how'd my nephew stand his ordeal?"

"He survived."

"He's not at home. He staying here?"

Lescroix shook his head. "He didn't think he'd be too welcome in Hamilton for a while. He's at a place on Route 32 West. Skyview Motel. I think he wants to see you. Thank you in person."

"We'll give him a call, the wife and I, take him out to dinner." He finished the whiskey and set the glass down. "Well, mister, it's a hard job you have. I don't envy you it." He appraised the lawyer with those sharp eyes. "Mostly I don't envy you staying up at night. With that conscience of yours."

A faint smile crossed Lescroix's face. His smiles tended to be colder than his most ferocious glare. "I sleep like a baby, sir. Always have."

They shook hands and walked to the door. Jerry's uncle stepped into the corridor but then stopped and turned. "Oh, 'nother thing. I'd listen to the news, I was you." He added cryptically, "You'll be hearing some things you might want to think on."

Lescroix closed the door and returned to the uncomfortable chair and his sumptuous whiskey. *Things I want to think on?* he wondered.

At six he picked up the remote control and clicked the TV set on, found the local news. He was watching a pretty young newscaster holding a microphone in front of her mouth.

" . . . it was this afternoon, while prosecutors were asking freed suspect Gerald Pilsett about the role of Charles Cabot in his wife's death, that Pilsett gave the shocking admission. A claim he later repeated for reporters."

Oh, my Lord. No . . . He didn't!

Lescroix sat forward, mouth agape.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jerry came on screen, grinning that crooked smile and tapping a finger against his earlobe. "Sure, I killed her. I told my lawyer that right up front. But there's nothing nobody can do about it. He said they can't try me again. It's called double jeopardy. Hey, their case wasn't good enough to get me the first time, that ain't my fault."

Lescroix's skin crawled.

Back to the blond newscaster. "That very lawyer, Paul Lescroix, of New York City, created a stir in court earlier today when he suggested that Hamilton businessman Charles Cabot himself killed his wife because he was in love with another woman. Police, however, have discovered that the woman Lescroix virtually accused Cabot of having an affair with is Sister Mary Helen Henstroth, a seventy-five-year-old nun who runs a youth center in Gilroy. Cabot and his wife frequently served as volunteers at the center and donated thousands of dollars to it.

"Police also dispelled Lescroix's other theory that Cabot might have killed his wife to take control of the company of which he is president. Even though he owned a minority of the shares, a review of the corporate documents revealed that Patricia Cabot and her father had voluntarily handed over one hundred percent voting control to Cabot after he paid back fifty thousand dollars her father had loaned him to start the business five years ago.

"State prosecutors are looking into whether charges can be brought against Lescroix for defamation and misuse of the legal process."

Furious, Lescroix flung the remote control across the room. It shattered in a dozen pieces.

The phone rang.

"Mr. Lescroix, I'm with WPIJ news. Could you comment on the claim that you knowingly accused an innocent man—"

"No." Click.

It rang again.

"'Lo?"

"I'm a reporter with the *New York Times*—"

Click.

"Yeah?"

"This that gawdamn shyster? I find you I'm gonna—"

Click.

Lescroix unplugged the phone, stood, and paced. Don't panic. It's no big deal. Everybody'd forget about it in a few days. This wasn't *his* fault. His duty was to represent a client to the best of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his ability. Though even as he tried to reassure himself he was picturing the ethics investigation, explaining the matter to his clients, his golfing buddies, his girlfriends . . .

Pilsett . . . What an utter fool. He—

Lescroix froze. On the TV screen was a man in his fifties. Unshaven. Rumpled white shirt. An unseen newscaster was asking him his reaction to the Pilsett verdict. But what had snagged Lescroix's attention was the super at the bottom of the screen:

James Pilsett, Uncle of Acquitted Suspect

It wasn't the man who'd hired him, who'd been here in the room an hour ago to deliver his fee.

"Wayl," the uncle drawled, "Jurry wus alwus a problem. Weren't never doing what he ought. Deserved ever lick he got. Him gitting off today . . . I don' unnerstand that one bit. Don' seem right to me."

Lescroix leapt to the desk and opened the envelope. The full amount of the rest of the fee was enclosed. But it wasn't a check. It was cash, like the retainer. There was no note, nothing with a name on it.

Who the hell was he?

He plugged the phone in and dialed the Skyview Motel.

The phone rang, rang, rang . . .

Finally it was answered. "Hello?"

"Jerry, it's Lescroix. Listen to me—"

"I'm sorry," the man's voice said. "Jerry's tied up right now."

"Who's this?"

A pause.

"Hello, counselor."

"Who are you?" Lescroix demanded.

There was a soft chuckle on the other end. "Don't you recognize me? And after our long talk in court this morning. I'm disappointed."

Cabot! It was Charles Cabot.

How had he gotten to Jerry's motel room? Lescroix was the only one who knew where the man was hiding out.

"Confused, counselor?"

But, no, Lescroix recalled, he *wasn't* the only one who knew. He'd told the man impersonating Jerry's uncle about the Skyview. "Who was he?" Lescroix whispered. "Who was the man who paid me?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No . . ."

But even as he said that, he understood. Lescroix closed his eyes. Sat on the bed. "Your father-in-law."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The rich businessman. Patricia's father.

I'm a firm believer in kin sticking together. . . .

"He hired me?"

"We both did," Cabot said.

"To defend your wife's killer? Why?"

Cabot sighed. "Why do you think, counselor?"

Slowly, Lescroix's thoughts were forming—like ice on a November pond. He said slowly, "Because there's no death penalty in this state."

"That's right. Maybe Jerry'd go to prison for life but that wasn't good enough for us."

And the only way Cabot and his father-in-law could get to Jerry was to make sure he was acquitted. So they hired the best criminal attorney in the country.

Lescroix laughed in disgust. Why, Cabot was the one playing *him* in the trial. Acting guilty, never explaining what he might've explained, cringing at Lescroix's far-fetched innuendos. Suddenly Lescroix remembered Cabot's words: *Jerry's tied up right now . . .*

"Oh my God, are you going to kill him?"

"Jerry? Oh, we're just visiting right now," Cabot said, "Jerry and me and Patsy's dad. But I should tell you, I'm afraid he's pretty depressed, Jerry is. I'm worried that he might do himself some harm. He's even threatened to hang himself. That'd be a shame. But of course it's a man's own decision. Who'm I to interfere?"

"I'll tell the police," Lescroix warned.

"Will you now, counselor? I guess you could do that. But it'll be my word against yours, and I have to say that after the trial today your stock's none too high round here at the moment. And neither's Jerry's."

"So what're you buying?"

"Peace of mind. That's what."

"Sorry to cut this short," Cabot continued. "I think I hear some funny noises from the other room. Where Jerry is. I better run, check on him. Seem to recall seeing a rope in there."

"Wait . . ."

A low, desperate moaning sounded through the line, distant.

"What was that?" Lescroix cried.

"Oh-oh, looks like I better go. So long, counselor. Hope you enjoyed your stay in Hamilton. Come back and see us sometime."

"Wait!"

Click. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

HERBERT IN MOTION

by Ian Rankin

Winner of the 1996 CWA gold dagger, the U.K.'s highest honor for crime writing, "Herbert in Motion" is a work that combines Ian Rankin's characteristically wry social commentary with a stunningly original suspense plot. Mr. Rankin has won the gold dagger for best short story two out of the last three years; he is one of the most talented of the younger British writers. ¶

My choices that day were twofold: kill myself before or *after* the prime minister's cocktail party? And if after, should I wear my Armani to the party, or the more sober YSL with the chalk stripe?

The invitation was gilt-edged, too big for the inside pocket of my workaday suit. Drinks and canapés, six P.M. till seven. A minion had telephoned to confirm my attendance, and to brief me on protocol. That had been two days ago. He'd explained that among the guests would be an American visiting London, a certain Joseph Hefferwhite. While not quite spelling it out—they never do, do they?—the minion was explaining why I'd been invited, and what my role on the night might be.

"Joe Hefferwhite," I managed to say, clutching the receiver like it was so much straw.

"I believe you share an interest in modern art," the minion continued.

"We share an interest."

He misunderstood my tone and laughed. "Sorry, 'share an interest' was a bit weak, wasn't it? My apologies."

He was apologising because art is no mere interest of mine. Art was—is—my whole life. During the rest of our short and one-sided conversation, I stared ahead as though at some startling new design, trying to understand and explain, to make it all right with myself, attempting to wring out each nuance and stroke, each

©1997 by Ian Rankin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

variant and chosen shape or length of line. And in the end there was . . . nothing. No substance, no revelation; just the bland reality of my situation and the simple framing device of suicide.

And the damnation was, it had been the perfect crime.

A dinner party ten years before. It was in Chelsea, deep in the heart of Margaret Thatcher's vision of England. There were dissenters at the table—only a couple, and they could afford their little grumble; it wasn't going to make Margaret Hilda disappear, and their own trappings were safe: the warehouse conversion in Docklands, the BMW, the Cristal champagne and black truffles.

Trappings: The word seems so much more resonant now.

So there we were. The wine had relaxed us, we were all smiling with inner and self-satisfied contentment (and wasn't that the dream, after all?) and I felt just as at home as any of them. I knew I was there as the Delegate of Culture. Among the merchant bankers and media figures, political jobsworths and "somethings" (and dear God, there was an estate agent there too, if memory serves—*that* fad didn't last long) I was there to reassure them that they were composed of something more lasting and nourishing than mere money, that they had some meaning in the wider scheme. I was there as the curator to their sensibilities.

In truth, I was and am a senior curator at the Tate Gallery, with special interest in twentieth-century North American art (by which I mean paintings: I'm no great enthusiast of modern sculpture, yet less of more radical sideshows—performance art, video art, all that). The guests at the table that evening made the usual noises about artists whose names they couldn't recall but who did "green things" or "you know, that horse and the shadow and everything." One foolhardy soul (was it the estate agent?) digressed on his fondness for certain wildlife paintings and trumpeted the news that his wife had once bought a print from Christie's Contemporary Art.

When another guest begged me to allow that my job was "on the cushy side," I placed knife and fork slowly on plate and did my spiel. I had it down to a fine art—allow me the pun, please—and talked fluently about the difficulties my position posed, about the appraisal of trends and talents, the search for major new works and their acquisition.

"Imagine," I said, "that you are about to spend half a million pounds on a painting. In so doing, you will elevate the status of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the artist, turn him or her into a rich and sought-after talent. They may disappoint you thereafter and fail to paint anything else of interest, in which case the resale value of the work will be negligible, and your own reputation will have been tarnished—perhaps even more than tarnished. Every day, every time you are asked for your opinion, your reputation is on the line. Meanwhile, you must propose exhibitions, must plan them—which often means transporting works from all around the world—and must spend your budget wisely."

"You mean like, do I buy four paintings at half a mil each, or push the pedal to the floor with one big buy at two mil?"

I allowed my questioner a smile. "In crude economic terms, yes."

"Do you get to take pictures home?" our hostess asked.

"Some works—a few—are loaned out," I conceded. "But not to staff."

"Then to whom?"

"People in prominence, benefactors, that sort of person."

"All that money," the Docklands woman said, shaking her head, "for a bit of paint and canvas. It almost seems like a crime when there are homeless on the streets."

"Disgraceful," someone else said. "Can't walk along the Embankment without stumbling over them."

At which point our hostess stumbled into the silence to reveal that she had a surprise. "We'll take coffee and brandy in the morning room, during which you'll be invited to take part in a murder."

She didn't mean it, of course, though more than one pair of eyes strayed to the Docklanders, more in hope than expectation. What she meant was that we'd be participating in a parlour game. There had been a murder (her unsmiling husband the cajoled corpse, miraculously revivified whenever another snifter of brandy was offered) and we were to look for clues in the room. We duly searched, somewhat in the manner of children who wish to please their elders. With half a dozen clues gathered, the Docklands woman surprised us all by deducing that our hostess had committed the crime—as indeed she had.

We collapsed thankfully onto the sofas and had our glasses refilled, after which the conversation came around to crime—real and imagined. It was now that the host became animated for the first time that night. He was a collector of whodunits and fancied himself an expert.

"The perfect crime," he told us, "as everyone knows, is one

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where no crime has been committed."

"But then there *is* no crime," his wife declared.

"Precisely," he said. "No crime . . . and yet a crime. If the body's never found, damned hard to convict anyone. Or if something's stolen, but never noticed. See what I'm getting at?"

I did, of course, and perhaps you do, too.

The Tate, like every other gallery I can think of, has considerably less wall space than it has works in its collection. These days, we do not like to cram our paintings together (though when well done, the effect can be breathtaking). One large canvas may have a whole wall to itself, and praise be that Bacon's triptychs did not start a revolution, or there'd be precious little work on display in our galleries of modern art. For every display of gigantism, it is blessed relief, is it not, to turn to a miniaturist? Not that there are many miniatures in the Tate's storerooms. I was there with an acquaintance of mine, the dealer Gregory Jance.

Jance worked out of Zurich for years, for no other reason, according to interviews, than that "they couldn't touch me there." There had always been rumours about Jance, rumours which started to make sense when you tried to balance his few premier-league sales (and therefore commissions) against his lavish lifestyle. These days, he had homes in Belgravia, Manhattan's Upper East Side, and Moscow, as well as a sprawling compound on the outskirts of Zurich. The Moscow home seemed curious until one recalled stories of ikons smuggled out of the old Soviet Union and of art treasures taken from the Nazis, treasures which had ended up in the hands of Politburo chiefs desperate for such things as hard dollars and new passports.

Yes, if even half the tales were true, then Gregory Jance had sailed pretty close to the wind. I was counting on it.

"What a waste," he said as I gave him a short tour of the storerooms. The place was cool and hushed, except for the occasional click of the machines which monitored air temperature, light, and humidity. On the walls of the Tate proper, paintings such as those we passed now would be pored over, passed by with reverence. Here, they were stacked one against the other, mostly shrouded in white sheeting like corpses or Hamlet's ghost in some shoddy student production. Identifier tags hung from the sheets like so many items in a lost-property office.

"Such a waste," Jance sighed, with just a touch of melodrama.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

His dress sense did not lack drama either: crumpled cream linen suit, white brogues, screaming red shirt, and white silk cravat. He shuffled along like an old man, running the rim of his panama hat through his fingers. It was a nice performance, but if I knew my man, then beneath it he was like bronze.

Our meeting—*en principe*—was to discuss his latest crop of "world-renowned artists." Like most other gallery owners—those who act as agents for certain artists—Jance was keen to sell to the Tate, or to any other "national" gallery. He wanted the price hike that came with it, along with the kudos. But mostly the price hike.

He had Polaroids and slides with him. In my office, I placed the slides on a lightbox and took my magnifier to them. A pitiful array of semi-talent dulled my eyes and my senses. Huge graffiti-style whorls which had been "in" the previous summer in New York (mainly, in my view, because the practitioners tended to die young). Some neo-cubist stuff by a Swiss artist whose previous work was familiar to me. He had been growing in stature, but this present direction seemed to me an alley with a brick wall at the end, and I told Jance as much. At least he had a nice sense of colour and juxtaposition. But there was worse to come: combine paintings which Rauschenberg could have constructed in kindergarten; some not very clever geometric paintings, too clearly based on Stella's "Protractor" series, and "found" sculptures that looked like Nam June Paik on a very bad day.

Throughout, Jance was giving me his pitch, though without much enthusiasm. Where did he collect these people? (The unkind said he sought out the least popular exhibits at art-school graduation shows.) More to the point, where did he sell them? I hadn't heard of him making any impact at all as an agent. What money he made, he seemed to make by other means.

Finally, he lifted a handful of Polaroids from his pocket. "My latest find," he confided. "Scottish. Great future."

I looked through them. "How old?"

He shrugged. "Twenty-six, twenty-seven."

I deducted five or six years and handed the photos back. "Gregory," I said, "she's still at college. These are derivative—evidence she's learning from those who have gone before—and stylised, such as students often produce. She has talent, and I like the humour, even if that too is borrowed from other Scottish artists."

He seemed to be looking in vain for the humour in the photos.

"Bruce McLean," I said helpfully, "Paolozzi, John Bellany's fish.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Look closely and you'll see." I paused. "Bring her back in five or ten years, if she's kept hard at it, if she's matured, and *if* she has that nose for the difference between genius and sham. . . ."

He pocketed the photos and gathered up his slides, his eyes glinting as though there might be some moisture there.

"You're a hard man," he told me.

"But a fair one, I hope. And to prove it, let me buy you a drink."

I didn't put my proposition to him quite then, of course, not over coffee and sticky cakes in the Tate cafeteria. We met a few weeks later—casually, as it were. We dined at a small place in a part of town neither of us frequented. I asked him about his young coterie of artists. They seemed, I said, quite skilled in impersonation.

"Impersonation?"

"They have studied the greats," I explained, "and can reproduce them with a fair degree of skill."

"Reproduce them," he echoed quietly.

"Reproduce them," I said. "I mean, the influences are there." I paused. "I'm not saying they *copy.*"

"No, not that." Jance looked up from his untouched food. "Are you coming to some point?"

I smiled. "A lot of paintings in the storerooms, Gregory. They so seldom see the light of day."

"Yes, pity that. Such a waste."

"When people could be savouring them."

He nodded, poured some wine for both of us. "I think I begin to see," he said. "I think I begin to see."

That was the start of our little enterprise. You know what it was, of course. You have a keen mind. You are shrewd and discerning. Perhaps you pride yourself on these things, on always being one step ahead, on knowing things before those around you have perceived them. Perhaps you, too, think yourself capable of the perfect crime, a crime where there is no crime.

There was no crime, because nothing was missing from the quarterly inventory. First, I would photograph the work. Indeed, on a couple of occasions I even took one of Jance's young artists down to the storerooms and showed her the painting she'd be copying. She'd been chosen because she had studied the minimalists, and this was to be a minimalist commission.

Minimalism, interestingly, proved the most difficult style to reproduce faithfully. In a busy picture, there's so much to look at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that one can miss a wrong shade or the fingers of a hand which have failed to curl to the right degree. But with a couple of black lines and some pink waves . . . well, fakes were easier to spot. So it was that Jance's artist saw the work she was to replicate face-to-face. Then we did the measurements, took the Polaroids, and she drew some preliminary sketches. Jance was in charge of finding the right quality of canvas, the correct frame. My job was to remove the real canvas, smuggle it from the gallery, and replace it with the copy, reframing the finished work afterwards.

We were judicious, Jance and I. We chose our works with care. One or two a year—we never got greedy. The choice would depend on a combination of factors. We didn't want artists who were *too* well known, but we wanted them dead if possible. (I had a fear of an artist coming to inspect his work at the Tate and finding a copy instead.) There had to be a buyer—a private collector—who would *keep* the work private. We couldn't have a painting being loaned to some collection or exhibition when it was supposed to be safely tucked away in the vaults of the Tate. Thankfully, as I'd expected, Jance seemed to know his market. We never had any problems on that score. But there was another factor. Every now and then there would be requests from exhibitions for the loan of a painting—one we'd copied. But as the curator, I would find reasons why the work in question had to remain at the Tate, and might offer, by way of consolation, some other work instead.

Then there was the matter of rotation. Now and again—as had to be the case, or suspicion might grow—one of the copies would have to grace the walls of the gallery proper. Those were worrying times, and I was careful to position the works in the least flattering, most shadowy locations, usually with a much more interesting picture nearby, to lure the spectator away. I would watch the browsers. Once or twice, an art student would come along and sketch the copied work. No one ever showed a moment's doubt, and my confidence grew.

But then . . . then . . .

We had loaned works out before, of course—I'd told the dinner party as much. This or that cabinet minister might want something for the office, something to impress visitors. There would be discussions about a suitable work. It was the same with particular benefactors. They could be loaned a painting for weeks or even months. But I was always careful to steer prospective borrowers away from the twenty or so copies. It wasn't as though there was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

any lack of choice! For each copy, there were fifty other paintings they could have. The odds, as Jance had assured me more than once, were distinctly in our favour.

Until the day the prime minister came to call.

This is a man who knows as much about art as I do home brewing. There is almost a glee about his studious ignorance—and not merely of art. But he was walking around the Tate, for all the world like a dowager around a department store, and not seeing what he wanted.

"Voore," he said at last. I thought I'd misheard him. "Ronny Voore. I thought you had a couple."

My eyes took in his entourage, not one of whom would know a Ronny Voore if it blackballed them at the Garrick. But my superior was there, nodding slightly, so I nodded with him.

"They're not out at the moment," I told the PM.

"You mean they're in?" He smiled, provoking a few fawning laughs.

"In storage," I explained, trying out my own smile.

"I'd like one for Number Ten."

I tried to form some argument—they were being cleaned, restored, loaned to Philadelphia—but my superior was nodding again. And after all, what did the PM know about art? Besides, only one of our Voores was a fake.

"Certainly, Prime Minister. I'll arrange for it to be sent over."

"Which one?"

I licked my lips. "Did you have one in mind?"

He considered, lips puckered. "Maybe I should just have a little look. . . ."

Normally, there were no visitors to the storerooms. But that morning, there were a dozen of us posed in front of the two Ronny Voores, *Shrew Reclining* and *Herbert in Motion*. Voore was very good with titles. I'll swear, if you look at them long enough, you really can see—beyond the gobbets of oil, the pasted-on photographs and cinema stubs, the splash of emulsion and explosion of colour—the figures of a large murine creature and a man running.

The prime minister gazed at them in something short of thrall. "Is it 'shrew' as in Shakespeare?"

"No, sir, I think it's the rodent."

He thought about this. "Vibrant colours," he decided.

"Extraordinary," my superior agreed.

"One can't help feeling the influence of pop art," one of the min-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ions drawled. I managed not to choke; it was like saying one could see in Beryl Cook the influence of Picasso.

The PM turned to the senior minion. "I don't know, Charles. What do you think?"

"The shrew, I think."

My heart leapt. The prime minister nodded, then pointed to *Herbert in Motion*. "That one, I think."

Charles looked put out, while those around him tried to hide smiles. It was a calculated put-down, a piece of politics on the PM's part. Politics had decided: A fake Ronny Voore would grace the walls of Number 10 Downing Street.

I supervised the packing and transportation. It was a busy week for me: I was negotiating the loan of several Rothkos for an exhibition of early works. Faxes and insurance appraisals were flying. American institutions were *very* touchy about lending stuff. I'd had to promise a Braque to one museum—and for three months at that—in exchange for one of Rothko's less inspired creations. Anyway, despite headaches, when the Voore went to its new home, I went with it.

I'd discussed the loan with Jance. He'd told me to switch the copy for some other painting, insisting that "no one would know."

"He'll know," I'd said. "He wanted a Voore. He knew what he wanted."

"But why?"

Good question, and I'd yet to find the answer. I'd hoped for a first-floor landing, or some nook or cranny out of the general view, but the staff seemed to know exactly where the painting was to hang—something else had been removed so that it could take pride of place in the dining room. (Or one of the dining rooms; I couldn't be sure how many there were. I'd thought I'd be entering a house, but Number 10 was a warren, a veritable Tardis, with more passageways and offices than I could count.)

I was asked if I wanted a tour of the premises, so as to view the other works of art, but by that time my head really did ache, and I decided to walk back to the Tate, making it as far as Millbank before I had to rest beside the river, staring down at its sludgy flow. The question had yet to be answered: Why did the PM want a Ronny Voore? Who in their right mind wanted a Voore these days?

The answer, of course, came with the telephone call.

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Joe Hefferwhite was an important man. He had been a senator at one time. He was now regarded as a "senior statesman," and the American president sent him on the occasional high-profile, high-publicity spot of troubleshooting and conscience-salving. At one point in his life, he'd been mooted for president himself, but of course his personal history had counted against him. In younger days, Hefferwhite had been a bohemian. He'd spent time in Paris, trying to be a poet. He'd walked a railway line with Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady. Then he'd come into enough money to buy his way into politics and had prospered there.

I knew a bit about him from some background reading I'd done in the recent past. Not that I'd been interested in Joseph Hefferwhite . . . but I'd been *very* interested in Ronny Voore.

The two men had met at Stanford initially, then later on met again in Paris. They'd kept in touch thereafter, drifting apart only after "Heff" had decided on a political career. There had been arguments about the hippie culture, dropping out, Vietnam, radical chic—the usual '60s U.S. issues. Then in 1974 Ronny Voore had lain down on a fresh white canvas, stuck a gun in his mouth, and gifted the world his final work. His reputation, which had vacillated in life, was given a boost by the manner of his suicide. I wondered if I could make the same dramatic exit. But no, I was not the dramatic type. I foresaw sleeping pills and a bottle of decent brandy.

After the party.

I was wearing my green Armani, hoping it would disguise the condemned look in my eyes. Joe Hefferwhite had *known* Voore, had seen his style and working practice at first hand. That was why the PM had wanted a Voore: to impress the American. Or perhaps to honour his presence in some way. A political move, as far from aesthetics as one could wander. The situation was not without irony: A man with no artistic sensibility, a man who couldn't tell his Warhol from his Whistler . . . this man was to be my downfall.

I hadn't dared tell Jance. Let him find out for himself afterwards, once I'd made my exit. I'd left a letter on my desk. It was sealed, marked Personal, and addressed to my superior. I didn't owe Gregory Jance anything, but hadn't mentioned him in the letter. I hadn't even listed the copied works—let them set other experts on them. It would be interesting to see if any *other* fakes had found their way into the permanent collection.

Only of course I wouldn't be around for that.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Number 10 sparkled. Every surface was gleaming, and the place seemed nicely undersized for the scale of the event. The PM moved amongst his guests, dispensing a word here and there, guided by the man he'd called Charles. Charles would whisper a brief to the PM as they approached a group, so the PM would know who was who and how to treat them. I was way down the list apparently, standing on my own (though a minion had attempted to engage me in conversation: It seemed a rule that no guest was to be allowed solitude) pretending to examine a work by someone eighteenth century and Flemish—not my sort of thing at all.

The PM shook my hand. "I've someone I'd like you to meet," he said, looking back over his shoulder to where Joe Hefferwhite was standing, rocking back on his heels as he told some apparently hilarious story to two grinning civil servants who had doubtless been given their doting orders.

"Joseph Hefferwhite," the PM said.

As if I didn't know; as if I hadn't been avoiding the man for the past twenty-eight minutes. I knew I couldn't leave—would be reminded of that should I try—until the PM had said hello. This was all that had kept me from leaving. But now I was determined to escape. The PM, however, had other plans. He waved to Joe Hefferwhite like they were old friends, and Hefferwhite broke short his story—not noticing the relief on his listeners' faces—and swaggered towards us. The PM was leading me by the shoulder—gently, though it seemed to me that his grip burned—over towards where the Voore hung. A table separated us from it, but it was an occasional table, and we weren't too far from the canvas. Serving staff moved around with salvers of canapés and bottles of fizz, and I took a refill as Hefferwhite approached.

"Joe, this is our man from the Tate."

"Pleased to meet you," Hefferwhite said, pumping my free hand. He winked at the PM. "Don't think I hadn't noticed the painting. It's a nice touch."

"We have to make our guests feel welcome. The Tate has another Voore, you know."

"Is that so?"

Charles was whispering in the PM's ear. "Sorry, have to go," the PM said. "I'll leave you two to it then." And with a smile he was gone, drifting towards his next encounter.

Joe Hefferwhite smiled at me. He was in his seventies, but extraordinarily well preserved, with thick dark hair that could

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

have been a weave or a transplant. I wondered if anyone had ever mentioned to him his resemblance to Blake Carrington. . . .

He leaned towards me. "This place bugged?"

I blinked, decided I'd heard him correctly, and said I wouldn't know.

"Well, hell, doesn't matter to me if it is. Listen," he nodded towards the painting, "that is some kind of sick joke, don't you think?"

I swallowed. "I'm not sure I follow."

Hefferwhite took my arm and led me around the table, so we were directly in front of the painting. "Ronny was my friend. He blew his brains out. Your prime minister thinks I want to be *reminded* of that? I think this is supposed to tell me something."

"What?"

"I'm not sure. It'll take some thinking. You British are devious bastards."

"I feel I should object to that."

Hefferwhite ignored me. "Ronny painted the first version of *Herbert* in Paris in forty-nine or fifty." He frowned. "Must've been fifty. Know who Herbert was?" He was studying the painting now. At first, his eyes flicked over it. Then he stared a little harder, picking out that section and this, concentrating.

"Who?" The champagne flute shook in my hand. Death, I thought, would come as some relief. And not a moment too soon.

"Some guy we shared rooms with, never knew his second name. He said second names were shackles. Not like Malcolm X and all that; Herbert was white, nicely brought up. Wanted to study Sartre, wanted to write plays and films and I don't know what. Jesus, I've often wondered what happened to him. I know Ronny did, too." He sniffed, lifted a canapé from a passing tray, and shoved it into his mouth. "Anyway," he said through the crumbs, "Herbert—he didn't like us calling him Herb—he used to go out running. Healthy body, healthy mind, that was his creed. He'd go out before dawn, usually just as we were going to bed. Always wanted us to go with him, said we'd see the world differently after a run." He smiled at the memory, looked at the painting again. "That's him running along the Seine, only the river's filled with philosophers and their books, all drowning."

He kept looking at the painting, and I could feel the memories welling in him. I let him look. I wanted him to look. It was more his painting than anyone's. I could see that now. I knew I should

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

say something . . . like "that's very interesting," or "that explains so much." But I didn't. I stared at the painting, too, and it was as though we were alone in that crowded, noisy room. We might have been on a desert island, or in a time machine. I saw Herbert running, saw his hunger. I saw his passion for questions and the seeking out of answers. I saw why philosophers always failed, and why they went on trying despite the fact. I saw the whole bloody story. And the colours: They were elemental, but they were of the city, too. They *were* Paris, not long after the war, the recuperating city. Blood and sweat and the simple feral need to go on living.

To go on living.

My eyes were filling with water. I was about to say something crass, something like "thank you," but Hefferwhite beat me to it, leaned towards me so his voice could drop to a whisper.

"It's a hell of a fake."

And with that, and a pat on my shoulder, he drifted back into the party.

"I could have died," I told Jance. It was straight afterwards. I was still wearing the Armani, pacing the floor of my flat. It's not much—third floor, two bedrooms, Maida Vale—but I was happy to see it. I could hardly get the tears out of my eyes. The telephone was in my hand. . . . I just had to tell *some*body, and who could I tell but Jance?

"Well," he said, "you've never asked about the clients."

"I didn't want to know."

"Maybe I should have told you anyway. It would save this happening again."

"Jance, I swear to God, I nearly died."

Jance chuckled, not really understanding. He was in Zurich, sounded further away still. "I knew Joe already had a couple of Voores," he said. "He's got some other stuff too—but he doesn't broadcast the fact. That's why he was perfect for *Herbert in Motion.*"

"But he was talking about not wanting to be reminded of the suicide."

"He was talking about *why* the painting was there."

"He thought it must be a message."

Jance sighed. "Politics. Who understands politics?"

I sighed. "I can't do this anymore."

"Don't blame you. I never understood why you started in the first place."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Let's say I lost faith."

"Me, I never had much to start with. Listen, you haven't told anyone else?"

"Who would I tell?" My mouth dropped open. "But I left a note."

"A note?"

"In my office."

"Might I suggest you go retrieve it?"

Beginning to tremble all over again, I went out in search of a taxi.

The night security people knew who I was, and let me into the building. I'd worked there before at night—it was the only time I could strip and replace the canvases.

"Busy tonight, eh?" the guard said.

"I'm sorry?"

"Busy tonight," he repeated. "Your boss is already in."

"When did he arrive?"

"Not five minutes ago. He was running."

"Running?"

"Said he needed a pee."

I ran too, ran as fast as I could through the galleries and towards the offices, the paintings a blur either side of me. There was a light in my superior's office, and the door was ajar. But the room itself was empty. I walked to the desk and saw my note there. It was still in its sealed envelope. I picked it up and stuffed it into my jacket, just as my superior came into the room.

"Oh, good man," he said, rubbing his hands to dry them. "You got the message."

"Yes," I said, trying to still my breathing. Message: I hadn't checked my machine.

"Thought if we did a couple of evenings it would sort out the Rothko."

"Absolutely."

"No need to be so formal, though."

I stared at him.

"The suit," he said.

"Drinks at Number Ten," I explained.

"How did it go?"

"Fine."

"PM happy with his Voore?"

"Oh yes."

"You know he only wanted it to impress some American?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One of his aides told me."

"Joseph Hefferwhite," I said.

"And was he impressed?"

"I think so."

"Well, it keeps us sweet with the PM, and we all know who holds the purse strings." My superior made himself comfortable in his chair and looked at his desk. "Where's that envelope?"

"What?"

"There was an envelope here." He looked down at the floor.

I swallowed, dry-mouthed. "I've got it," I said. He looked startled, but I managed a smile. "It was from me, proposing we spend an evening or two on Rothko."

My superior beamed. "Great minds, eh?"

"Absolutely."

"Sit down then, let's get started." I pulled over a chair. "Can I let you into a secret? I detest Rothko."

I smiled again. "I'm not too keen myself."

"Sometimes I think a student could do his stuff just as well, maybe even better."

"But then it wouldn't be *his*, would it?"

"Ah, there's the rub."

But I thought of the Voore fake, and Joe Hefferwhite's story, and my own reactions to the painting—to what was, when all's said and done, a copy—and I began to wonder. . . . ●

"HE'S A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Darryl Elliott

UNMARKED GRAVES

by George C. Chesbro

Veil dreams.

As the A train pulled into the West Fourth Street station, Veil Kendry heard the wail of a human over the scream of machinery, and he turned to his left to see a knot of people gathering around someone lying in their midst on the subway platform. He pushed through a wall of startled and curious commuters and came upon a frail young Chinese woman giving birth.

"Get back and give her room to breathe!" he said sharply, raising and loosening her dress as he knelt beside her in a pool of her burst water. It turned out to be a needless request, for the harried New Yorkers were already surging around them in a rush to get on the train. He shouted to no one in particular, "Tell the motorman to call the paramedics!"

The train pulled out of the station, and the few people who had

©1997 by George C. Chesbro

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gotten off glanced nervously at the tableau of a man and woman, blood and water on the concrete, and walked quickly away. In a few moments they were alone on the platform. Veil positioned himself between the woman's legs and gently cradled the tiny, bloody head that was emerging from the birth canal. Between gasps and cries the woman spoke to him rapidly in what Veil recognized as Chinese. He spoke, or at least understood, a number of Asian languages, but not Chinese, and so he spoke to her softly and soothingly in English. When the baby emerged Veil wiped away the placenta, bit through the umbilical cord and knotted it, then gently laid the newborn infant on the mother's heaving chest. "Here you are, Mama," he said quietly, caressing her cheek. "Calm down, now. It's all right. People will be here soon to take care of you."

The woman's reaction startled him. Still speaking rapidly and obviously distressed, she picked up her baby and held it out to him, urgently and repeatedly gesturing for him to take it. "I don't want your baby, Mama," he said, shaking his head as he pressed the infant back down on her chest, noticing as he did so the rope burns on her wrists. "She's yours. Take it easy. Everything's going to be fine."

There was a clattering sound behind him, and Veil looked over his shoulder as two paramedics who had just come down the stairway, a Sikh and a Hispanic, unfolded the collapsible stretcher they carried and hurried up the platform, followed close behind by a black patrolman who was speaking into a crackling walkie-talkie.

"Not too trashy, pal," the Sikh said, nodding his approval as he gazed down at the woman and her baby. "You a doctor?"

Veil started to rise, but the woman would not release her tight grip on his wrist, and so he eased himself back down beside her. "An observer," he replied. "I've seen a few babies delivered."

"You work in a hospital?"

"I used to work in a jungle."

The Hispanic grunted as he handed Veil a towel to wipe the blood from his hands. "This is the seventy-fifth subway delivery this year. That puts us a little bit ahead of schedule. The birth rate down here is nice and steady. We'll take care of her now."

The woman looked around, gasped, then renewed her urgent efforts to hand Veil her baby. Veil turned in the direction the woman had looked and saw that three scowling Chinese youths, one an albino, had suddenly appeared on the platform and were standing just behind the paramedics. They were identically

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dressed in jeans, black sneakers, and black satin jackets embroidered with red dragons. The policeman cursed under his breath.

"She is our sister," the Chinese in the middle, a husky youth with a tiny spider tattooed on his forehead, said in unaccented English, his tone low and menacing as he glanced in turn at the paramedics, the policeman, and Veil. "We became separated. We will take her now."

The Hispanic said hesitantly, "Your sister's just had a baby here on the platform, mister. It's October, and it's cold. They both need to be taken to a hospital, cleaned up, and looked after."

"She doesn't need a hospital," the albino said, stepping around the gurney and reaching down to take the trembling woman's baby. "We'll take care of her."

"I think not," Veil said in a flat tone, blocking the youth's movement by reaching out and planting his left palm firmly on the husky man's chest. He gently but firmly twisted his right wrist free of the woman's grip, then straightened up, keeping his left palm on the Chinese youth's chest. The Chinese was pressing forward with all his weight as he glared at Veil, baring his clenched teeth and making low, guttural sounds in his throat. The albino and the third youth, a man in his late teens or early twenties with a pockmarked face, were moving to flank and press him toward the edge of the subway platform.

The policeman moved closer to Veil, said quietly, "These guys are Shadow Dragons, buddy, and we're right on the border of their turf. As a rule of thumb it generally works out best for everybody if the Chinese are left to take care of their own affairs. They say this woman is their sister, maybe we should let them take her and the baby."

"I think not," Veil repeated in the same even tone, meeting the hate-filled gaze of the Chinese pressing against his hand at the same time as he tracked the movements of the other two with his peripheral vision. "They're not her brothers. Look at her; she's terrified. We'll get her and her baby to a hospital, then find an interpreter to tell us what she wants."

Suddenly the youth in front of Veil reached into the right pocket of his satin jacket and withdrew a box cutter, which he used to slash at Veil's exposed wrist. But Veil's left arm was no longer in the space between them, and the razor sliced nothing but air. The sudden and violent movement caused the youth to lose his balance and lurch sideways. Veil stepped behind him, grabbed the back of the youth's jacket and his belt, whirled him around once, and then

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

released his grip, sending the Chinese hurtling through the air like some unwieldy human discus. The youth landed on his face and chest, skidded a few feet, then lay still.

The policeman reached for his gun as nunchaku sticks and a knife suddenly appeared in the hands of the other two youths.

"You won't need that," Veil said to the policeman as he quickly stepped away from the woman and out into the center of the platform to give himself more room. "This is just a friendly discussion about proper health care."

The youth with the nunchaku attacked first, the two hardwood sticks connected by a chain a blur as he whirled them in intricate patterns in front of his body and over his shoulders. Veil spun away from the first strike, at the same time slipping out of his leather jacket, shifting his weight, and delivering a side kick to the solar plexus of the knife-wielding albino, who had rushed in on his left flank. The breath came out of the albino in a great whoosh before he doubled over, grabbed at his stomach, sank to his knees, and began to retch.

Obviously startled by Veil's quickness and skill, the pockmark-faced youth hesitated just long enough to lose his rhythm. Veil darted forward, swinging his leather jacket over his head and snagging the connecting chain between the nunchaku sticks. He yanked, pulling the sticks from the youth's hands and catching them in the air. He tossed aside his jacket, then began to twirl the sticks as he slowly advanced on the Chinese, whose face had gone ashen. Veil stopped next to a support pillar, beat out an intricate tattoo on the steel, then casually tossed the sticks to the Chinese, who made no move to catch them. The deadly weapon fell at the youth's feet, then clattered away on the concrete. Then the youth bolted, darting in a wide circle around Veil and going to the albino, who was still on his knees and clutching at his stomach. The pockmark-faced youth pulled the albino to his feet, and together they went up the platform to help the Chinese with the spider tattoo, who was just regaining consciousness. The three of them disappeared up a stairway at the opposite end of the platform.

"It looks like we'll be using my health plan," Veil said as he walked casually back to where the policeman, paramedics, and woman were all staring at him, wide-eyed.

"The Shadow Dragons are a particularly nasty gang," the policeman said to Veil. "They're likely to come looking for you." Veil shrugged as he helped the paramedics lift the woman and her newborn baby onto the gurney. "I'm easy enough to find."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The policeman narrowed his eyes as he studied the rangy but solidly built man with the glacial blue eyes and shoulder-length, gray-streaked yellow hair. "Your name Veil Kendry?"

Veil glanced at the man, replied evenly, "That's right."

"I've heard of you."

"I hope it was good."

"It depends on who you talk to. You're a friend of the crazy dwarf, aren't you?"

Veil laughed, but abruptly reached out and grabbed the end of the gurney when the paramedics started to wheel it away. The woman was still staring at him, a naked plea for help in her limpid almond eyes. "Where are you taking her?"

The two men glanced at each other, and the Sikh answered, "You may have a health plan, mister, but it doesn't look like she does. She doesn't even have a purse. We'll take her to the clinic at Bellevue."

"Take her to St. Vincent's. It's closer."

"We don't have a contract with St. Vincent's. They won't—"

"Don't worry. I'll pay."

The paramedics looked at the policeman, who nodded. "He's a hotshot artist with big bucks. He's good for it."

The Hispanic asked, "How are you going to pay, mister?"

"Plastic. What else?"

"What are we supposed to tell them when—?"

"I'll tell them myself. I'm coming with you."

The Hispanic nervously cleared his throat, said, "We're not running a taxi service, mister. It's against company policy to transport civilians who aren't relatives of a patient."

Veil took his wallet from his pocket, removed the money from it. "I've got eight dollars and change. I'll get you more if you stop at an ATM machine."

"Big bucks, huh?" the Hispanic said wryly, glancing at his partner, then down at the woman, who continued to gaze imploringly at Veil. Finally the man shrugged. "Come on, buddy. Keep your money. Mama here obviously wants your company, and I guess you've earned the right."

Throughout the short ride to the hospital the woman gripped Veil's wrist with her free hand while Veil spoke to her soothingly in English. At the hospital, where he was known, he arranged to have the woman and her child admitted for postnatal care and observation. He left a credit card at the desk, walked to another part of the building, then used an electronically coded key card to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gain entrance to a private elevator that took him to the top floor. He exited, walked to his right and through a swinging door marked *Sleep Research Laboratories*. In a small, dimly lighted office on the right a woman with long blond hair and dressed in a white lab coat sat with her back to him as she monitored an array of instruments on a console before her and made notes on a yellow legal pad. Beyond her, behind a glass panel, three men and a woman lay sleeping on cots, wire leads running from their heads, arms, and chests.

"Good day, Dr. Solow," Veil said quietly, moving up behind the woman and placing his hands gently on her shoulders.

"Veil!" Sharon Solow said without looking around. "What are you doing here? I thought you were going to the Whitney to supervise the hanging of your show."

"Something came up—or out, actually—and I had to take a detour. Since I was in the neighborhood, I thought I'd drop in and say hello."

"I'm glad. I'll be right with you. I want to notate this data while it's fresh. I think I may have resonance here; all four subjects went into REM at virtually the same time."

"How's the kid with the night terrors doing?"

"Much better, thanks to you. He's using the techniques you taught him to simply roll away from the dream and go back to Stage Two sleep, or dream himself someplace else. Most of the time he goes someplace else, because he knows you do that. He idolizes you."

"Where does he go?"

"Disneyland, mostly."

"Sounds like a good choice to me. Free admission, and he doesn't have to wait in line for the rides."

"Veil, what's that smell?"

"Probably blood and placenta."

Now Sharon Solow spun around in her chair, and her mouth dropped open when she saw the stains on his shirt front and jeans. "Veil, what happened?!"

He grinned. "I delivered a baby on the subway platform a little while ago. Mother and baby doing very well downstairs, thank you. But I need to get cleaned up before I go to the museum. I could have gone home, but I seemed to remember I have a change of clothes here."

"You always have a change of clothes here, love," Sharon said,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

squeezing his hand. "You go wash, and I'll join you when I finish here."

Veil showered in the locker room reserved for the laboratory's test subjects, then toweled off and started to dress in clean clothes. Sharon appeared in the doorway as he was slipping on a denim shirt. She came over and helped him button it, then kissed him. "Thank you, love," she said softly.

"For what?"

"Just for being you. For being our baseline research subject and authority on vivid dreaming, and for helping all the other vivid dreamers who come here looking for help because they can't handle it like you do. And, of course, for coming through the Lazarus Gate to save my life."

Veil smiled thinly. "It took me a long time to find a way to bring you back; you were in a coma for almost three years. To my knowledge, you and I are the only two people who have actually gone through it and come back. And you can never do it again. I couldn't help you. You'd stay dead."

Sharon whispered, "I'm aware of that, Veil. No more machines and drugs. Ever."

"You miss the CIA funding?"

"Do roosters crow in the morning? Of course I miss the CIA funding. But I don't miss the CIA. We make do."

"And they still don't know what happened?"

"Not a clue. And they'll never know—unless either you or I tell somebody, and I'm no more likely to do that than you are."

"Good."

"There," Sharon said, helping Veil put on his sports jacket and plucking off an imaginary piece of lint. "That's a great artist's costume. Are we still on for dinner?"

"For sure."

"See you later, love."

Veil dreams.

Vivid dreaming is his gift and affliction, the lash of memory and a guide to justice, a mystery and sometimes the key to mystery, prod to violence and maker of peace, an invitation to madness and the fountainhead of his power as an artist.

Veil arrived at the hospital at noon the next day with flowers and a basket of baby clothes only to be told by the nurse at the reception desk that the Chinese woman and her child were gone. As Veil stared at her uncomprehendingly, the nurse quickly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

added, "An elderly Chinese gentleman with a lawyer came for her this morning; they'd called the ambulance service to see where she'd been taken. The old man was very polite, and the lawyer had papers showing that the woman was his granddaughter."

"You're sure of that?"

The woman behind the desk flushed slightly. "Well, the papers were in Chinese, but everything seemed in order."

"Jesus Christ," Veil breathed, his eyes suddenly flashing blue fire.

"Sir, I was with them when they talked to her."

"In Chinese?"

"Yes, sir. But the woman offered no resistance. She seemed perfectly willing to go with them."

Veil sighed. "That nice old Chinese gentleman and his lawyer probably told her they'd bury her baby alive and kill her family in China if she didn't go with them willingly."

The blood drained from the nurse's face. "What?"

"Never mind," Veil said curtly, placing the clothing and flowers on the desk. "It's too late to do anything about it. Give these to some other patient."

He returned to his loft and worked feverishly, trying to put the mother and baby out of his mind and center himself.

Thousands of vultures of unspeakable cruelty and injustice circled the city day and night, and the fact that the wings of this particular dark bird had brushed his face did not mean there was anything he could do to track and bring it to ground and rescue its prey. The woman and her baby were lost, almost certainly untraceable, beyond his help.

The attempt to blot out rage and memory with canvas and paint did not work, and he finally gave up the struggle. There were still debts that he owed, and he felt he did not have the right to refuse to at least try to repay them when the opportunity arose.

In late afternoon he washed out his brushes and walked over into Chinatown to buy a bird.

Veil dreams.

He is Archangel, the CIA's most efficient and ruthless operative in their secret war in Laos. He gathers intelligence by acting as liaison to the anti-Communist Hmong tribes in the mountains, but mostly what he does is hunt and kill the enemy. This is war, and so he is rewarded for his murderous bent and skills. But he kills not out of love for country, but for himself. Violence is a need. It will be many years before he learns to control the vivid dream-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing that is at the root of his battle with insanity and finds both redemption and healing in painting his nightmares. Now it is only extreme violence that holds in check his personal demons and allows him to find rest in the occasionally savage dreamworlds of his nights.

Despite the fact that he is constantly teetering on the edge of madness, he does not lack feelings of intense loyalty to, and even love for, the people of these mountain villages he has armed and fought with. Now he is particularly concerned about the safety of one particular tribe, for he has been spotted and recognized by the Pathet Lao on a trail close to the Hmong village. He kills four of the guerrillas and escapes from the others by leaping from a tall cliff into a raging river where he loses consciousness and floats downstream for some distance before finally being washed ashore. It is after nightfall when he regains consciousness. Dazed and cold, he nonetheless immediately begins the arduous climb up out of the gorge, for he knows that he must warn the villagers that they will be suspected of collaborating with Archangel, and all will be made to pay the price.

He completes only half the climb before he leans back on a pillow of air, falls through space, and rolls away from the dream into deeper sleep. He has no need to complete the journey now, for he knows what he will find at the end. He has returned to the village many times before. He has come this far now only to take the temperature of his soul and test his resolve, to see how far he will go in real time to atone for the past by trying to save another woman and her baby in the present.

Veil arose at 5:30 A.M., washed and dressed, then cut up an old sheet to use as a shroud to cover the birdcage. He disguised himself, then picked up the cage, left the building, and walked the few blocks from his home in the East Village to the Delancey Street corner of Sara Delano Roosevelt Park on the western boundary of the traditional area of New York's Chinatown.

He hobbled on his cane into the park, then sat down on a bench at the southern end and watched from under the wide, floppy brim on his hat as other men, each carrying a shrouded birdcage, entered the park from all directions. They sat on the benches, some together and others alone, and as the sun began to rise and heat the day they carefully rolled the covers on their cages to one side, reenacting a centuries-old tradition. A lone bird began to sing, and soon it was joined by another, and another. Soon the air

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in the park was filled, filigreed, with the trilling of birds. There were calls and countercalls, and within the space of a few minutes it seemed as if all the birds were singing the same song, improvising on a single melody.

Veil rolled back the cover on his cage, but nothing happened. He bent over and looked inside the cage at his hua mei, a brownish song thrush with splashes of olive and gray that was found near the Yangtze River in China and in parts of Southeast Asia. The bird sat silently on its perch, staring back at Veil. Veil clucked and softly whistled a few times, but the bird steadfastly ignored him. Veil grunted and shook his head, and when he looked up he saw the man he had come to talk to enter the park. Veil waited until the silver-haired banker had chosen a spot to sit, and then he rose, picked up his birdcage, and hobbled over to him.

"My bird will not sing," Veil said quietly. "I thought perhaps you might tell me why."

The man, dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a blue windbreaker over a white sweatshirt, looked up, fixed Veil with his soulful brown eyes, then frowned as recognition came. "Veil?"

"Not my name, Chou. I don't want anyone to know who you're talking to. You're just having a conversation with an old man. Can you tell me what's wrong with the bird?"

The middle-aged banker hesitated, then pulled back the cover from Veil's birdcage and looked inside. "First of all, it's from Shanghai," he said, a note of distaste in his voice.

"How can you tell?"

"Its beak lacks the black traces found in the best birds, which are from Guandang Province. How much did you pay for this bird?"

"Seven hundred dollars."

"You were cheated. A bird that has not yet picked up songs from other hua mei should cost no more than five hundred. What do you know about hua mei?"

"Nothing, really, except I remembered that you and the others bring your birds to the park each morning to sing. It's considered a virtuous hobby, and a distraction from vice."

"The birds won't sing if they don't eat well, and this one looks as if it has not been properly cared for. Without proper food, the feathers get dull, like this one's, and the bird has low morale."

"Birds have morale?"

"Most definitely. They must also be allowed to bathe frequently. I will write down for you a recipe for preparing a proper diet."

"Thank you, Chou."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What is your real reason for wanting to see me?"

"I need information. I wish to know which of the three tongs controls the slaving business down here. It will be the one that controls the Shadow Dragons gang."

The banker made a sound in his throat like he was choking, then abruptly picked up his birdcage and began to walk rapidly away. Veil remained motionless, waiting, watching the man's back. The silver-haired banker had almost reached the sidewalk when his pace began to slow, and finally he stopped. He remained motionless for almost a minute before turning and walking slowly back to Veil, furtively glancing around him as he did so.

"You shame me," the man whispered to Veil, and then bowed his head.

"Certainly not my intention, Chou."

"My wife and I wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for you. I owe you more than I can ever repay."

"You owe me nothing. I didn't come here to ask you to repay any debt, only to ask for information."

"This is very dangerous talk."

"The reason I'm in disguise and walking my bird like all the other men in the park. The people I'm looking for will not know I've spoken to you."

"Now you are trying to help someone else?"

"'Trying' is the operative word. I'm looking for a woman I'm sure was brought into this country illegally. She and her family probably contracted for a lot of money to have her smuggled in, and now the people who brought her have her working in a brothel to pay off her debt—which will never happen. She escaped long enough to have her baby, but her slavers caught up with both of them. It's just a strong suspicion. If I'm wrong, then I suppose I'll never find her."

"These people will not speak with you, Veil."

"My problem."

"Even you could disappear without a trace in Chinatown, Veil. The people you're looking for are not just above the law here; they are the law. The police cannot help you if you get into trouble."

Veil did not reply. He waited, watching the other man. Finally the banker sighed, continued, "The man you want to talk to is Grandfather—Chan Fu Ong. It is his tong that controls the smuggling of Asians into this country."

"Where do I find him?"

"His headquarters is a social club—really a gambling and heroin den and a brothel—on Elizabeth Street. But you—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Thank you, Chou," Veil said, slipping the cover back over his birdcage. "May your hua mei sing well today."

He returned to his loft to paint, practice, eat, and rest, and in the early evening he again shrouded his hua mei, picked up the cage, and walked back into Chinatown, to Elizabeth Street. It was not difficult to find the place he was looking for, for a knot of satin-jacketed Shadow Dragons stood around the entrance to the four-story building. The three youths he had confronted on the subway platform were among them. As he approached, all three—surprise clearly etched on their faces—stepped out to block his path. They glared at him, the surprise in their eyes quickly turning to a film of rage and hatred.

"Nice evening," Veil said evenly to the youth in the center, the Shadow Dragon with the spider tattooed on his forehead. The boy had a large bandage over his nose, deep scratches on his left cheek, and both eyes had been blackened.

"You must be crazy!" the Shadow Dragon said in a choked voice, the color draining from his face.

"You aren't the first person to think or say so," Veil answered in the same flat tone. He glanced up at the surveillance camera mounted over the doorway. "I've come to speak to Grandfather."

There were grunts of surprise, whispers among the gang members. The albino said, "Who is this 'Grandfather' you speak of?"

"Don't waste my time, sonny," Veil said, still looking up at the television camera. The other gang members had moved to surround him. He seemed to be ignoring them, but in fact he was very conscious of the position and body language of each youth, and was prepared to move to defend himself at any moment. "Mr. Ong would consider that impolite."

"What do you want?"

"None of your business, sonny."

He sensed the closing of a Shadow Dragon behind him. Veil shifted his stance slightly. He was about to spin around and plant the side of his hand in the youth's throat when the tension was abruptly broken by the trill of a cellular phone. The youth with the pockmarked face took a phone out of one of his jacket pockets, put it to his ear, listened for a few moments, then said, "Yes, Grandfather," before disconnecting and putting the phone back in his pocket. He looked at Veil oddly, then continued, "It's the door at the back."

Veil walked down the stairway to the below-ground entrance. The lock on the door buzzed as he reached out to turn the knob,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and he entered a large basement hall crammed with tables and chairs filled with Chinese who were gambling at various games of chance. All activity and conversation stopped as he wended his way around the tables toward the door at the rear of the hall. He knocked once on the door, then opened it and entered a spacious, thick-carpeted office paneled in dark mahogany and decorated with antique murals of Oriental motifs. A slight, old Chinese man with a long, wispy goatee and dressed in an expensive suit that was too big for him sat behind a massive oak desk. He was flanked by two tall, heavily muscled Chinese with shaved heads who were dressed in flowing silk robes. Aside from the one the old man sat in, there were no chairs in the room.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me, Grandfather," Veil said as he walked across the room and stopped in front of the desk. "My name is—"

"Veil Kendry," the old man said in a wheezing voice that had a lilting, sing-song quality to it. "You are a friend of the crazy dwarf."

Veil smiled thinly. "My claim to fame."

"Hardly. You are a well-known artist whose work is displayed in museums and galleries around the world. You create what are called dream paintings, and it is rumored that your style springs from some sort of physical affliction from which you suffer. You were not always so . . . aesthetically oriented. You are a master of the martial arts, with an eclectic style that is largely self-taught. You were a CIA operative during your country's conflict in Southeast Asia. You were considered an insane and merciless killer by your enemies, and your night visits were much feared. Your code name was Archangel. Should I go on?"

"Not if it's meant to impress me. I'm already impressed."

"I have many sources of information in the Asian communities here—as, obviously, do you. After you so efficiently intimidated and dispatched three of my finest young warriors, I felt it a good idea to find out something about you. I asked about a man fitting your description. It was not difficult to obtain information." The old man paused, added somewhat ominously, "I know where you live."

"I'm practically your neighbor."

"It is quite remarkable how you have retained so many of your fighting skills into middle age. You must practice a great deal."

"A great deal."

Chan Fu Ong gestured to indicate the burly, robed, blank-faced Chinese flanking him. "Wing and Kwok were very impressed. I'm sure you would be impressed by their skills. Unfortunately, they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cannot give you a demonstration. They were both champions in China, but the rules of the secret martial arts society to which they belong dictate that any combat they engage in must be fought to the death."

"I am not interested in fighting or sowing discord between us, Grandfather," Veil said, stepping forward and placing the shrouded birdcage on one corner of the massive desk.

"I bring you this gift as a token of my respect."

The old man leaned forward to draw back the cover on the cage and examine the bird inside, then leaned back in his chair and once again regarded Veil. "You are here about the woman and her baby?"

"Yes, Grandfather."

"Why?"

"They are very important to me."

"Why?"

"It's personal."

"She is not here against her will."

"I don't believe I implied that she was."

"She and her family contracted with our benevolent society to bring her to this country, where she might search for a better life. She is free to do that—after she has worked to pay off what she and her family owe me, which is a great deal of money. This was all agreed upon beforehand. There is a contract."

"Somehow I don't believe she thought she would be forced to work as a prostitute."

"Now you are being rude, Mr. Kendry. She is an entertainer. Businessmen come here to relax. She helps them unwind."

"What about the baby? The baby can't be of any value to you."

"It's an unfortunate situation. We discourage pregnancy until the debt is paid. The woman hid it from us. She was not really trying to run away, you know. She had no money, no place to run to. It's remarkable she managed to get down on the subway platform where you found her. All she wanted was to have her baby away from here. She probably intended to give the infant away to the first person who would take it, in the hope that the child would be raised as an American. Perhaps she even offered it to you. If you'd wanted to make her happy, you should have taken the child—and hoped that we didn't find you. Since the baby was the fruit of her body, which belongs to us until her debt is paid, the baby belongs to us. We will sell it to some childless couple. The child will probably end up being raised American, which is all the woman wanted anyway. We will apply the purchase price to her debt, and she will

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be free that much sooner. It works out best for everybody."

"I wish to purchase the woman's contract. Her baby will be part of the deal."

The old man smiled thinly, but there was no humor in his icy hazel eyes. He pulled at his wispy goatee, said, "A million dollars should do it. Do you have that kind of money, Mr. Kendry?"

"Now it is you who are being rude to me, Grandfather. Mockery is an impolite response to a serious offer. The top going rate for smuggling a foreign national into this country is thirty-five thousand dollars. That is what I will pay."

The old man made a dismissive gesture, glanced toward the ceiling. "What do you really know about Chinatown, Mr. Kendry?"

"Jack Nicholson. Faye Dunaway. John Huston."

"Now it sounds like it is you who are mocking me. That would be very unwise."

"I understand what you're saying, Grandfather. Here, things are done your way. People here do not cooperate with the police, for your word is the only law they recognize. The intrigues of Chinatown are closed to outsiders. If I were to fail to leave here, it would be as if I never existed."

"Correct."

"I just want to make a business deal, Grandfather. I understand that things can get complicated around here, but I don't see why this has to be one of those things. If I'd wanted to waste my time, I would have gone to the INS and complained that the head of the tong that controls the Shadow Dragons gang is running a prostitution ring stocked by illegal aliens, or I could have told my story to the police and put them to sleep. Instead I came to you, with respect."

The old man turned to the Chinese on his right, said, "Inspect the bird, Kwok."

The man called Kwok reached across the desk, opened the cage, and cupped his hand around the bird inside. He removed the bird, gave it a cursory inspection, then abruptly closed his fist, crushing the hua mei into a mass of blood, tiny bones, and feathers that oozed through his thick fingers. He threw the bloody remains back into the cage, wiped his hands on the shroud, then stepped back. "It is from Shanghai," he said in English, his face impassive as he stared straight ahead, through Veil. "It has not been cared for or trained properly, and it does not sing. It is worthless."

"I do not do business with foreigners, Mr. Kendry," the old man said in his soft, wheezy voice. "Leave here now, and be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thankful you are still alive to sing your songs."

Veil stood motionless, his face impassive as he returned the gaze of Chan Fu Ong and considered his options, which appeared to range from few to nonexistent. Attempting to reopen the discussion would be futile, and would only earn him the tong leader's contempt—which might prove more dangerous than his anger. Both bodyguards had altered their stance slightly and placed their hands behind their backs, presumably gripping the short fighting swords they would be carrying in the sashes of their robes.

He knew that many lives could depend on what he did in the next few seconds. On the eve of an important show at the Whitney Museum he could be plunged into a war with one or more gangs, and that war could easily spill over the boundaries of Chinatown. All of his resources would have to be redirected to defense and attack, and, in view of the numbers that would be sent against him, he would have to begin hunting again, as he had done so long ago. The streets of lower Manhattan could become a killing ground like the ones he had waded through so long ago. He had not come here to atone for personal guilt; in the final analysis, the Pathet Lao had been responsible for what had happened to the Hmong chieftain and his pregnant wife. Prodded by memory, he had come here simply to try to chase a bit of evil from the world and replace it with a bit of good. Now it appeared that could not be done. Killing, or dying, would accomplish nothing; indeed, the woman and child he had come to help could very well end up among the first victims of any conflict that began in this room. It would be a senseless battle, just like so many of the senseless battles he had been a part of so long ago.

Veil turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

Veil dreams.

He completes his journey back to the village, his clothes and flesh torn by the numberless tiny claws of the jungle he has surged through in an attempt to warn the villagers before the Pathet Lao come. But he is too late. Every man, woman, and child in the village has been slaughtered. Both the chieftain and his pregnant wife have been tied to stakes, disemboweled, and beheaded. The woman's head lies at her feet in a pool of gore that had once been the child growing inside her.

He uses his bare hands and his knife to dig shallow graves for the chieftain and his wife and their unborn baby, then slips back

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into the jungle to begin a hunt of vengeance that will last six weeks.

There had been no tears in him then, no ability to cry, but his life has changed and he now weeps copiously in his dream as he flies away from the village, high over the jungle, rolls away, and drifts back down into deep sleep.

It was dusk when Veil finished the first panel in the mural that had become his work-in-progress. He framed it, then went into the kitchen area of his loft and took a garbage bag from beneath the sink. He put the painting in the bag, then went out and walked back over to Chinatown.

He was prepared to gain entrance to Chan Fu Ong's brothel and social club any way he had to, but breaking in proved unnecessary. When he approached the phalanx of Shadow Dragons at the entrance to the building and looked up at the television camera, the door buzzed almost immediately. He entered, walked through the crowded hall that had once more gone absolutely still, and went through the door at the opposite end.

The tableau in the office was the same as it had been the day before, with the two blank-faced, robed bodyguards flanking the old man with the wispy goatee, who sat behind his desk.

"Thank you for seeing me again, Grandfather," Veil said in a flat tone as he stopped before the desk.

"You have the look of someone who feels he has left something unsaid, Mr. Kendry. This is the last time you will be admitted here, for, in fact, there is nothing left to say."

"That is unacceptable, Grandfather."

The old man's thin lips curled slightly at the corners of his mouth. "Unacceptable? I simply refuse to do business with you."

"You caused me to lose face."

Chan Fu Ong laughed scornfully. "Lose face? What do you know about losing face?"

"You killed my bird."

"It was worthless."

"Not to me. I was growing quite fond of it; you could say I always root for the underbird. You humiliated me in front of your men. To make up for that you must agree to turn the mother and child over to me." He paused, took the painting out of the garbage bag, and held it up for the other man to see. "This is what I will give you in exchange for the woman's contract."

The tong leader studied the painting, frowned. "A green blob? This is what you call 'art'?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I work on a very large scale—wall-length murals that are comprised of dozens of separate panels that are sold separately. As it so happens, collectors and dealers around the world vie to find and gather together the panels to complete the larger work, like a jigsaw puzzle."

"An unusual commercial gimmick."

"The way I work and choose to present it. The ideas often come to me in fragments, in dreams, and so the work is sold in fragments. In time, this painting could be worth more than the thirty-five thousand dollars I originally offered you."

The old man looked back and forth between his bodyguards, then giggled. "What will the larger work of yours depict, Mr. Kendry?"

"A place I visited many years ago. There was once a village there, but now it is just jungle, completely overgrown. The completed work will be titled 'Unmarked Graves.'"

Chan Fu Ong held out one of his frail hands. "Give it to me. Wing, here, is my art assessor. I will have him evaluate your work as Kwok did your hua mei."

"I think not. I have already told you its value. You'll get it when you bring the woman and child to me."

"I have no interest in Western art."

"Develop it. If you do not accept this offer, then you will have made an enemy of Archangel. If you do that, your operations in this particular sphere of yours may not continue to run so smoothly. You've taken pains to warn me that what happens here may never get the attention of the outside world. Fine. Archangel was always good in the jungle."

"You are a fool, Mr. Kendry," the tong leader said in a tight voice. His flesh had gone the color of faded parchment.

"And you are a whoremaster, a slaver with no heart, no soul, and no honor."

"Kill him!"

Fighting swords suddenly appeared in the hands of both bodyguards. The Chinese raised the swords over their heads and came at Veil from both sides. Veil killed the man on his left, Kwok, first, hurling the throwing knife he carried in a scabbard on his wrist into the man's throat. In virtually the same motion he spun around to his right, avoiding Wing's sword thrust. He completed his spin by driving his stiffened fingers into the man's exposed side, breaking ribs, then gripping the wrist of his sword hand. He broke Wing's arm at the elbow, then put his forearm under the man's chin and yanked. The man's neck snapped with a loud crack.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Now Veil bowed slightly to the ashen-faced, open-mouthed old man behind the desk, said softly, "I am sorry we could not do business, Grandfather."

When he had finished, he hung his painting on a wall, then picked up the garbage bag and walked out of the office, closing the door behind him. His footsteps echoed in the still hall as he approached the albino Shadow Dragon who was standing guard next to a door Veil was certain must lead to the brothel.

"What's your name?" Veil asked as he stopped in front of the youth.

The youth glanced uncertainly back and forth between Veil's grim face and the garbage bag he held slung over his shoulder. "Lee Yeung," the boy said at last.

"I am Archangel. I am death. I have a message for you from Grandfather. This brothel is to be closed, effective immediately. The woman I helped on the subway platform and her baby are to come with me, and the contracts of all the other women are to be considered fulfilled. You and the others in your gang are to see that they are shielded from the immigration authorities and absorbed into the community. You will find them suitable housing and employment—which will not involve prostitution. Naturally, nothing of what has happened here will be told to the police or other authorities. When I walk out of this building, it will be as if I never existed. Otherwise, Grandfather, the Shadow Dragons—and even the leaders of the other tongs—will lose face. If you do as I say, the matter is finished with and forgotten; if you do not, then you will deal with me. Grandfather says I should hold you personally responsible for seeing that his wishes are carried out. Are his instructions clear, Lee?"

The youth flushed, bared his teeth, then took a step backward and put a hand inside his jacket. "Grandfather would not wish for me to take orders from you!"

Veil shrugged, then handed the youth the garbage bag. "Here, sonny. You can talk to him yourself."

Obviously puzzled, the Shadow Dragon opened the bag and looked in, then let out a strangled cry and dropped it. As the three heads rolled out across the hardwood floor and gasps of astonishment rippled through the hall, Veil stepped around the youth, pushed open the door, and passed into the twilight world of cries, moans, tears, and sadness beyond. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Bone Jar

by Candace Robb

Hailed by many reviewers as the rightful heir to Ellis Peters, Candace Robb is the author of the Owen Archer mystery series, set in fourteenth-century York. Archer appears in the following piece, Ms. Robb's first story for *EQMM*. Readers who'd like to see more of him should look for the upcoming novels *The Riddle of St. Leonard's* and *The Maze of Freythorpe* (St. Martin's). ¶

The tide was in. The Ouse River swirled round the small island of rock on which stood a solitary hut fashioned from bits of flotsam and jetsam, crowned by a much patched, no longer seaworthy Viking longboat from York's past. Owen Archer folded his long legs into the coracle left for him on the muddy bank. The back of his neck tingled, as if someone was watching him, but he turned too late to see clearly the dark figure that disappeared into the smoke of the cooking fires. He told himself it meant nothing, the man had no doubt been staring at the water, not him. But why had he then dropped out of sight when Owen turned? He was uneasy as he fought his way across the rushing current.

On the other side, Owen pulled the coracle onto the rock, tied it up, passed under the dragon that leered upside down from the prow of the longboat, and knocked on Magda Digby's door. When he received no answer, he opened the door gingerly, peered round it. As he had thought, Magda Digby, midwife and healer, was bent over a patient.

"Draining old Daniel's wound, Bird-eye. Thou canst wait quietly."

The hut was smoky and dusty from the herbs that hung drying from the planks of the longboat. "I'll wait without."

Magda nodded, intent on her work.

As Owen sat down on a bench facing back toward York, he felt the watcher's eyes upon him, but could pick out no one on the

©1997 by Candace Robb

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bank. Though he breathed in the damp river air and tried to relax, a shower of needle pricks across his blind left eye revealed his tension. He rubbed his scarred eye beneath the patch that hid the worst of the disfigurement.

It was not the watcher on the bank that worried Owen. Magda's messenger had not known why the riverwoman wanted Owen, just that "thou must come today." Owen feared Magda had bad news about his wife's health or that of the babe she carried. His stomach churned. He could not bear the thought of losing Lucie. And something of her spirit would die if she lost this child.

Not a man who could sit still for long in the best of circumstances, Owen rose from the bench to pace.

At last Magda appeared, rubbing her eyes, stretching with a satisfied sigh. She wore a colorful dress made from the squares of wool on which she tested dyeing plants. Sewn together, they formed a shapeless gown that confused the eye of the beholder when Magda moved quickly, which she invariably did despite her great age. Her grizzled hair was tucked up into a clean kerchief.

"Old Daniel's shoulder will heal?" Owen asked.

Magda squinted up at him. "Aye, Bird-eye." Gnarled fists on hips, she leaned back and studied Owen's face. "Such a frown thou wearest! Art thou so concerned for old Daniel?" Her deep-set eyes teased, though her mouth was stern.

Owen sank down onto the bench. "In truth, 'tis your purpose in calling me here that worries me."

"Magda might ask thee to imperil thy soul, is that what thou fearest?" She threw back her head and gave a loud, barking laugh.

"No. I fear you've summoned me because something is amiss with Lucie."

"Thy child's coming is the center of thy world at present." Magda shook her grizzled head and sat down beside Owen. "Thy wife is a master apothecary, Bird-eye, she knows to take care of herself. And with Magda assisting—who has delivered more babes than thou canst imagine—all will be well." She patted his knee.

Owen closed his eye and said a silent prayer of thanksgiving.

Magda grunted, folded her arms, leaned back against the wall. "Magda must go up into the Dales. She asks thee to guard her house for two nights." She snorted as Owen glanced back at the ramshackle building with a puzzled expression. "What is to guard against but wind and flood, eh? Magda reads thy mind, Bird-eye." She rose, motioned for him to follow her round the house. Under

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the stern of the old ship that capped the hut stood a jar almost as tall as Magda herself. "Magda's bone jar, that is what's to guard. The bone man comes in two days."

Owen laughed. Who would steal such a thing? He had once shifted the jar for her and knew its heft. "You fear the bones will walk before the relic dealer arrives, do you?"

Magda frowned. "Laugh not. A man has been watching Magda's house, waiting for her to leave. He knows of the bone jar. He knows a leg and part of an arm wait in the jar for the bone man, who gives them a Christian burial."

"You have the bones buried? Is that common practice?"

Magda shrugged. " 'Tis Magda's way."

"Why not make some profit on them?"

The sharp eyes bored through him. "Thinkst thou art clever? Pah. Magda pities the poor wretches who pray to dried skin and bones, expecting miracle cures. She won't be part of such traffic."

"This thief won't come for them while you're here?"

Magda shook her head.

"Why not?"

"Thou knowest why, Bird-eye. Some folk think that because they do not see Magda in church she is a spell-casting heathen. They fear Magda."

Owen could not deny that. "I could dispose of the bones for you."

The riverwoman shook her head. "Magda's bone man prays over them as he buries them. Magda does not have the prayers. Nor dost thou, not the proper prayers."

The riverwoman's beliefs puzzled Owen, though Lucie seemed to understand them. She said that faith came hard to Magda. She must see to believe. But Magda understood that most folk needed the Church to comfort them and keep them on the path of righteousness. "Your bone man is a priest?"

"A friar."

Magda placed her trust in the oddest creatures. "Friars are not opposed to relics. Why trust him?"

"He understands Magda removes cursed limbs. They must be left in peace."

Generous man; there was money to be made in relics. Owen hoped Magda was not being cheated. "And you want me to sleep here and scare off anyone who lurks about?"

"Aye."

"Why me?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Thou art a good man, Bird-eye. Thou'lt let thy God guide thee."

God guide him in catching a thief. A strange way of putting it, but in the end it was God's hand guided all men in their work. Owen shrugged. "You have done much for me and asked naught in return. 'Tis time I returned the favor." It was a change from the political webs in which the archbishop was wont to snare him.

The wrinkles deepened about her mouth and eyes as the river-woman smiled. "Magda knew thou wouldst aid her. Though thou lookst a rogue, thou art a gentle man, Bird-eye. See thou takest care. Thou hast a family would miss thee and curse Magda if aught happened to thee."

"Lucie is close to her time. What if the babe—"

"Peace, Bird-eye. Magda knows the signs. Lucie is not ready. Magda will return in time. See that thou comest tomorrow evening."

"This thief will stay away during the day?"

"Young Jack will watch during the day. Easy for the lad to draw attention in daylight if he needs help. Not so easy at night."

Owen should have known Magda would think of everything.

Long before sunset the next day Owen passed out the gates of the city. He picked his way down to the riverbank through mud and the ramshackle huts of the poor, looking for the man who had watched him the previous day. A cat sniffed and followed, hoping to trick him out of the sweet he carried in his bag. Children watched him uneasily, his height, his dark beard, and the patch over his scarred face all fearful. Would his own child fear him so?

He searched the vermin city and found no one as well fed as a relic dealer. At last he gave up and rowed the coracle over to Magda's rock. Young Jack had been waiting. He jumped up, eager to get off the island before dark.

"Did anyone bother you today, lad?"

"Nay, Captain Archer. 'Twas a quiet day."

Owen drew a cup covered in oiled cloth from his bag and from it pulled a slice of angelica stem dipped in honey. "Mistress Wilton thought you might enjoy this."

The boy's eyes lit up. "Thank you, Captain!"

Owen returned it to the cup and handed it to Jack. "There's a cat waiting on the bank for it. Take care to hold it high."

The boy carefully placed it on the floor of the coracle and picked up the oar.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"See that you return early," Owen said as he untied the boat and eased it into the water.

"I won't fail you, Captain," the boy cried as he paddled off.

Owen watched to see that Jack reached the riverbank without mishap, then walked round the outside of the house before heading in. Within, fresh straw had been spread on the mud floor. Owen wondered where Magda got so much energy at her age. Though no one in York knew how old she was, no one could remember her not being here. Even Bess Merchet, proprietress of the York Tavern and reservoir of city history, could not say how old Magda was or whence she'd come to the odd house on the rock. Magda was a good friend to him and Lucie, but they knew little about her. Owen might learn something of Magda's past with a careful search of the house. Tempting, but he would not so betray a friendship.

He went outside, settled on the bench facing back toward the city, poured himself some ale from the jug he'd brought with him, and settled in to watch and wait. He leaned back and looked up at the dragon's head silhouetted against the evening sky. What sort of folk went to sea with such a monster on their prow? Why did Magda choose such a thing to crown her house? She made a joke of it, but why had she really chosen it? To guard the jar?

For that matter, how did he know what was actually in the jar? A leg and part of an arm, would those call for a constant watch? What did Magda care whether the bones went to a relic dealer or were given a Christian burial? And what was the point of a Christian burial if the limbs were not with the rest of the body? When the bones rose up on Judgment Day, how were they to find the rest of the body and rejoin it?

Owen stood and shook his arms and legs to loosen them after his long sit in the damp air. Silly thoughts he was having. He looked about him. The stars were brightening in the darkening sky and the water lapped quietly away from the north side of the rock. He walked slowly round the house, listening for sounds nearby. Nothing but the water and his own footsteps.

He approached the jar, standing tall and silent, its lid secure. Perhaps he should have looked within while it was light. What if the thief had already struck? Owen considered getting a lantern and checking now. He put his hands on either side and gently rocked the jar. Felt much the same as the day Magda had asked him to move it for her. It had been empty then. Perhaps it was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

empty now and he was playing the fool. He rocked it again. Something shifted within.

No doubt he would be uneasy until he looked inside.

Owen continued his circuit of the hut, then went in to get a lantern. He cursed himself when he found the fire almost out. Had he come in much later he would have spent a cold night in the dark. Now he must take the time to stoke the fire.

By the time Owen had the fire burning once more, he was thirsty and hungry. He spread his cold meal of bread, cheese, and meat out on a table and poured himself an ale. Sitting down, he stretched his booted feet out toward the fire and took a long, satisfying drink, then bent to the food. He was noisily chewing the hard-crusted bread when he heard a noise at the door. He stopped chewing, held his breath—heard nothing but the gentle lapping of the water and the far-off cries of the night watchmen. He had not realized how much time had passed. Perhaps he should make a circuit of the rock before he finished his meal. And take a look inside the jar. He lit a lantern and stepped outside.

Something came whistling through the air toward Owen's head. He stepped back and the missile flew past him, falling with a plop into the river. Closing the shutter on the lantern, Owen dropped down to a squat. It was now quite dark and a mist rose up from the river, not too thick, but just enough to shield him as long as he stayed low. He peered out into the dark but saw no one moving. Nor did he hear anyone. Staying low, he crept to the corner of the building and listened. The tide was out and the mud would noisily suck at a walker's feet. Nothing. His attacker must be on the rock.

Still in a crouch, Owen edged along the north side of the house toward the back. A scraping sound. He paused. Heard it again. The sound echoed. He hurried round the corner, saw at first only the jar. But the scraping sound came again. Now he noticed motion at the top of the jar. The thief was working on the lid.

Owen sat back on his heels and considered his options. He could open the shutter and surprise the thief with the light. After all, where could the thief run? And how likely was it he could outrun Owen? But tackling him to the ground would be far more satisfying. Owen had worked up a lot of tension and a nice physical attack would help work it off. But he must not be too violent; he wanted to find out who the thief was and why he attacked Owen but not Magda.

Inching closer, keeping against the house, Owen gradually saw

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the man's outline, smelled his fear. He waited—the thief was the same height as the jar and it would be difficult to keep his arms stretched up to work at the lid for long. When he lowered his arms, shaking them, Owen leapt. He knocked the thief to the rocky ground with a satisfying thud.

"Sweet Jesu, you've broken my limbs!" the thief cried.

"More for the jar," Owen muttered. He rose and pulled the thief up by his clothes. The man wobbled and crumpled against Owen. For pity's sake, what was such a weak cur doing thieving? Owen grabbed him up and slung him over his shoulder. The man whimpered, but he did not struggle.

Inside, Owen dropped his limp burden onto one of Magda's cots and finally got a look at the thief in the firelight. He was astonished. "John Fortescue! What does the clerk of the Mercers' Guild want with the riverwoman's bones?"

The wizened face of the young man crinkled in shame. "Captain Archer, forgive me." He tried to sit up, winced, and fell back clutching his left arm.

Seeing John's pain, Owen regretted the fury of his attack. John was a frail young man, aged beyond his years by some curse that wrinkled his skin and bent his body like an old man's. "You fell on the arm and broke it, eh? I'm sorry. But I'll be damned if I can think of an innocent explanation for your activities tonight." Owen searched Magda's worktable for bandages and a splint.

John lay still. "I was thieving, Captain Archer. 'Tis the unholy truth."

Armed with the necessary supplies and a jug of brandywine, Owen knelt beside the cot. "Let me examine your arm." Owen handed John the jug. "Drink some of this." He felt round on the arm while John drank; a bone in the forearm had snapped like that of an old man. But it would not take much of a tug to set it. "Brace yourself." Owen tugged. John made a terrible face, but kept stoically silent. Owen splinted the arm and bound it close to John's body. "What of the leg? You stumbled when you stood up."

John wiggled his foot. "It's my ankle. Sprained, I think."

Owen examined it, nodded, sat back on his heels. "You'll do best to keep off it for a few days." He crossed his arms over his chest and studied the clerk's dark, mud-spattered clothing, his pale, wrinkled face, the frightened eyes. "Why are you thieving, is what I wonder. You have neither the strength nor the temperament for it. Nor the need, I should think—the chief clerk of the richest

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

guild in the city—surely you are well paid."

"I am after health, not wealth," John said softly, keeping his eyes downcast. "But I did not start out to steal, Captain. I asked the riverwoman if I might have the skin off the boy's arm. She refused. Said it must be given a proper burial."

"Her arrangement for the bones is an odd one, I'll grant you that. But what did you want with the skin? And how did you know about the arm?"

John bit his lower lip, a naughty child explaining his behavior. "It is for a remedy—for afflictions of the skin. I must bind a piece of young, unblemished skin to my forehead for seven days and seven nights. At sunset on the seventh day I crawl the length of York Minster while chanting a Latin charm, and then I have a seventh son bury the skin that night—the seventh night."

As his wife's apprentice in the apothecary, Owen had heard many such remedies. "It sounds harmless enough; except that such charms usually call for the skin of a pig or some other flesh readily available."

The clerk took a deep, shivery breath, crossed himself. "So it has all been for naught. Blessed Mary, Mother of God, forgive me my sin." He rubbed his arm; his eyes glittered with tears.

"What did Magda tell you?"

John wiped his nose on his sleeve. "She said that I must accept the truth, that my affliction is not of the skin, but affects every part of me. My body is in haste to grow old and expire. There is no cure for it." John picked up the jug of ale and drank, then passed it to Owen. "But I thought, what harm was there in trying? The Lord might hear my prayer. Who was she to judge whether He would choose to bless me?" He sighed. "Now I pay for my arrogance."

Owen understood. Well he knew how desperate the afflicted one was to put his body right. The loss of Owen's eye had meant the loss of his world—no longer was he worthy to be Henry of Lancaster's captain of archers. Even after Lancaster's physician had declared him blind in his left eye, Owen had tortured himself with tests, thinking he'd seen a glimmer of light on the left. "When I first came to York, I hoped Magda might cure my blindness. But she told me that there was nothing more to be done." He took a drink. "It was not easy to accept. She knew. She said I would ever after see her as partly to blame. And I do sometimes, God forgive me."

"And why not blame her? She condemned me to sit and wait for an early death."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We all face death, John."

The angry look surprised Owen. "You don't understand. When an old man wrinkles and weakens into a shuffling gait, he thanks the Lord for a good life and looks forward to eternal rest. I am not ready for that. I have not yet lived."

Owen pitied him. But surely it did him no good to brood. "Seems to me you've done a bit of living tonight, haven't you now? Creeping out here, slinking round, attacking me." He laughed, picked up the jug and drank again, waiting for an echo of laughter. But John had lain down and covered his head with his arm.

"What I've told you—about the pig's skin—it simplifies things, doesn't it?"

John shrugged. "Maybe."

"You didn't tell me how you learned about the arm, John."

"A traveler. He delivered some items to the guild hall. He told me about the charm and said the riverwoman would have what I needed." The voice was muffled under the arm.

Suddenly Owen jumped up. "He was your partner, wasn't he? He was out there tonight."

John lay very still.

Good Lord, he'd been so stupid. "I should have seen it was too easy. You were distracting me."

"And all for naught," the muffled voice whined.

"Not for your partner, you fool. He's got the bones and a good head start." Owen took the lantern and rushed out into the night. He shoved the flat stone lid off the jar and let it fall with a clatter while he trained the light on the inside. Empty. He shined the lantern out on the mud flat, but he knew it was useless. While he'd been playing the good Samaritan in the hut, the thief had taken the bones and escaped. He'd known Owen wouldn't be listening, thinking he'd caught his thief—and injured him. Furious with himself, Owen picked up the stone lid and threw it into the river. He wanted to put his fist through the wall of the house, grab John Fortescue by the neck, and throttle him—but what would be the point? John was the victim as much as he. Owen sat down on the bank and tried to calm himself.

When his mind cleared, he went inside, seeking answers.

John sat up, waiting for him, his eyes wide with fear.

"Why did your thief put Magda on her guard?"

"He didn't know where she kept the bones, and he didn't want to linger here, searching all those boxes and jars piled up against the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

house. He said she would watch the bones if we worried her, and then we'd know. He was clever."

"Easy to be clever when you're working with fools." Owen sat down and glumly drained the jug of ale.

Owen went out to the rock as soon as he had word Magda was back. She sat on the bench beneath the serpent, mending a shoe. Without looking up, she said, "Magda knows the worst."

He sank down beside her. "I failed you. I'll make no excuses."

"Thou wert there to protect the innocent fool, Bird-eye."

"But the bones are gone. Sold by now, no doubt."

Magda chuckled. "If only Magda might have seen the thief's face at dawn, when he took out the bones and saw his treasure. Or woke to its smell." She was overtaken by a bout of mirth.

Owen had a sinking feeling. How many people had fooled him? "What were they?"

"The bones of an old goat that strayed onto the mud flats and died."

"And the bones for the bone man?"

"He came before Magda left." She patted Owen's knee. "Magda is not disappointed in thee. Thou hast done as Magda had hoped. John will heal, and he has seen the folly of his search for a miracle. The thief is gone, no more spying on Magda."

"No doubt I've learned something, too, though I cannot see it. Why did you have me here?"

"If he had felt no danger, the thief would have examined the bones, Bird-eye, and spoiled Magda's fun."

"But what of poor John?"

"Fortescue respects thee. He will not wish to appear a fool to thee again, so he will behave now. So." She snipped the thread, squinted up at Owen. "How dost thou like working for Magda? A nice change from politics?"

Owen rubbed his scar. "In truth, I'd rather a month on the road for the archbishop than another night in your hut."

Magda turned the mended shoe inside out, tugged it on, stood up, hopped, nodded. "Suit thyself, Bird-eye," she said with a shrug and went inside.

Owen did not leave at once, but sat there, staring down at the rising tide, trying to remember what it had been like to be able to see upstream as well as down. At last he gave up. A useless exercise. That had been another life. He headed for home. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In This House Of Stone

by Jeremiah Healy

1.

Our Lady of Perpetual Light fit its setting like a lambskin glove. The church rose three stories in gray, pink, and blue fieldstone, the white steeple spiring above it visible for half a mile as I'd driven through the small business district of Meade, about fifteen miles southwest of Boston. From the driveway, I could see the office annex, two floors of the same stone and connected to the church, nestled against the autumn-fired oaks and maples. The trees stood at the edges of a macadam parking area that surrounded the buildings like a moat.

Congratulations to Jeremiah Healy on his 12th Shamus Award nomination. The Shamus, given by the Private Eye Writers of America, recognizes achievement in the field of "hardboiled" crime fiction. Mr. Healy's novels and stories are not as hard-edged as those of some other P.I. writers but his record of Shamus nominations and wins is phenominal. This year's honor is for *Invasion of Privacy* (Pocket Books). ✝

Over the telephone, Monsignor Joseph McNulty had told me on which side of the annex to park. Very specific directions they were, too, as though he felt it important for my car to be in just the right place. Leaving the Prelude in a diagonal, white-lined space, I could hear the dirge of organ music coming from the church to my left as I walked up to the heavy wooden entrance of the annex. Pushing a button mounted on the jamb produced a tinkling noise inside, like the sound of canticle bells I'd shaken as an altar boy.

When the door opened, a stubby man with bushy gray eyebrows looked out at me. He wore a priest's reversed white collar, black shirt, and black pants. The shirt was short-sleeved despite the October air, the man's arms pale and veined. His face was veined too,

©1997 by Jeremiah Healy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but many of the capillaries had burst, as though my host counted among his faithful the likes of Jim Beam and Jack Daniels.

"Monsignor McNulty?"

"Ah yes. And you'd be John Cuddy, then. Our private investigator."

He didn't phrase any of it as a question, his voice that combination of brogue and wheeze you hear in men his age, which I'd have put as near sixty.

I said, "Not yet, Monsignor."

"Beg your pardon?"

"I'm not your private investigator until you tell me what you want done, and I agree to try and do it."

McNulty didn't seem fazed. "Well, come in, come in."

I followed him down a corridor that seemed to run the width of the annex, a door similar to the one I'd entered at the other end. A smaller hallway branched left toward the church itself.

McNulty turned into an office on the right, the air smelling of old pipes and old sweat. It reminded me again of my days as an altar boy, the priests not always that careful about laundering their robes and other vestments. The monsignor had a large wooden desk and one wall of exposed stone. His windows were arched rectangles, half the panes around the lead made of stained glass. One window gave a nice view of the parking area and my car in it. The room was hot, and I could understand why my host wore short sleeves.

McNulty noticed me looking at the baseboard heaters. "One of the parishioners installed them, *gratis*. Do a wonderful job of taking the chill off the stone, sometimes too wonderful. Sit, please."

I took a visitor's chair while McNulty turned himself sideways and went behind his desk. He used both hands on the arms of the desk chair to lower himself into it. "So. This being the first time my church has needed the services of a private investigator, I suppose I don't know where to start. Money?"

"Why don't we wait on my fee until after you tell me why you called me."

McNulty nodded judiciously. "You honestly don't know what happened here at the church last week."

"I've been out of town for a while."

A sigh. "Last Tuesday, it was. In the afternoon sometime. It's still not . . ." The words seemed to come hard for him, and he turned to look out his window. "My other priest, Francis Riordan,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was struck down and killed in his office across that corridor."

During my trip, I'd heard a throwaway line on a radio news program about a priest being killed near Boston, but no details. "Monsignor, I'm sorry."

Another nod. "Frank—he always preferred nicknames, Francis did, especially his own."

My middle name being Francis, I could understand that. "Go on."

"It happened sometime between lunch and dinner, because when he didn't come to table that evening, I went to his office. He was lying there, his head in a pool of his own . . . blood."

"The police have any suspects?"

"The police?" A grunted laugh. "I'm afraid not. They've already stereotyped this. 'Crackhead who panicked.' "

"In Meade?"

McNulty shifted against his chair, making the leather squeak. "Frank Riordan was a fine man, Mr. Cuddy. And I mean a man, not one of those Nancy-boys the seminaries seem to be hatching these days."

I'd never heard the expression, but McNulty flicked his wrist as he said it. I was beginning not to like him very much.

"No, Frank played football in college. Came to his vocation later than some, but for that, all the more sure of it."

"Monsignor, what does this have to do with a drug addict attacking him here in Meade?"

McNulty fixed me with a baleful look. "Frank volunteered at St. Damian's House. Do you know it?"

A place for disadvantaged kids in a tough part of Boston. "I know of it."

"Yes, well. Frank thought the lads could do with a look at how the other half lives. So he persuaded Joyce Steinberg—the owner of the health club he belonged to out here—to sponsor a basketball tournament for them. Took a bunch of the boys on a tour of our church buildings as well. The police believe one or more of them came back to rob him."

"Anything taken?"

"His little computer, one of those 'notebook' things, I think he called it. And his chalice."

The goblet Father Riordan would have used to celebrate Mass. "Monsignor, were you here that afternoon?"

"Of Frank's . . . death, you mean?"

"Yes."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I was. Sitting right at this desk, going over some budgetary matters."

"Did you hear anything?"

"No, but these walls are thick." Swiveling in his chair and pitching forward, McNulty slapped a palm against the exposed fieldstone. "And following my directions, did you notice anything about the parking outside?"

I thought I saw what he meant. "That the lot winds around the church and annex."

"Exactly. I was sitting here, but someone who knew Frank, and who knew the layout of the buildings here, could have come down the driveway, gone around the other side, and parked near Frank's entrance on the backside of the annex. I wouldn't have seen or heard them come in or go out." Another glance to his window, or to the stained glass within it. "I know, because I didn't that afternoon."

"Have the police questioned the boys from St. Damian's?"

"Oh, they tell me so. The chief here assures me that they've gone through the lot of them, one and all. Nothing."

"Any other possibilities?"

"What?"

Things are usually what they appear to be, but I still asked the next question. "Aside from the burglary-gone-bad, could anyone else have had a reason to want Father Riordan dead?"

McNulty seemed shocked. "What are you saying? You never met the man. He was a saint, genuinely. A Renaissance man with a heart, Mr. Cuddy."

"Then I don't quite see what you want me to do."

"Yes, well." McNulty calmed down. "The truth is, I don't know what you should do. It's clear to me that the police have given up on Frank. They haven't said that in so many words now, but they've implied as much."

"Monsignor, the police have more resources than I do. If they've canvassed St. Damian's, and you can't give them any other leads, there's not likely going to be some breakthrough because of me."

McNulty frowned, a shrewd look on his booze-weathered face. "Is it the case you've no taste for, or the man trying to give it to you?"

Perceptive. "I don't like taking money with no possibility of result."

"Not what I'd call an answer, but I caught the look on your face when I said 'Nancy-boy,' so enough for now." The man weighed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

something. "How about if you look into it for a few days? Just give me your opinion as to whether or not it makes sense to pursue."

"I think I already have, Monsignor."

McNulty showed me a sad smile. "My church has stood on this site for a hundred years, Mr. Cuddy." Instead of slapping the exposed wall, he caressed it. "A round century of tragedy has touched this house of stone, but never so closely, or so deeply. I loved that boy like a father loves a son, and now somebody has taken him from me."

McNulty's eyes welled up, and he sniffed so hard it was nearly a snorting sound. "I owe it to Frank to have someone who's skeptical—and who doesn't much care for me—look into it. Someone whose opinion I can trust. And I feel I can trust you, Mr. Cuddy."

Not liking the man was one thing, not feeling for him another. "I'd have to let the police know I was working for you."

"Why? They told me I could even dispose of his effects, though God knows I haven't had the courage to do that as yet."

"It's still an open homicide, Monsignor. I don't have to get their permission. I just have to let them know somebody's going to be out there, asking questions. They might also be able to help me."

"You ever met the chief here, Smollett?"

"Once. I was hoping he might have retired by now."

Very nearly a real smile from Monsignor Joseph McNulty. "Perhaps you'll be able to push him on his way."

2.

The only other time I'd been to the Meade police station, the chief's door had been newly painted. It now showed signs of wear, including scuff marks centered at the bottom where somebody seemed to have a habit of kicking it open. The uniform escorting me knocked.

"Yeah," said a gravelly voice on the other side of the door.

I had to push hard to open it, the height of the carpeting in the office creating the problem. New carpeting. Solve one problem, create another.

The chief, sitting behind his desk, made no effort to get up. I didn't expect he would. The old and worn nameplate on his blotter said SMOLLETT, no rank or first name.

"Cuddy. What do you want?"

"Can I sit?"

A wave of the hand to answer me and dismiss the uniform.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Smollett's nameplate had stood the test of time better than its owner. The knuckles on the hand were knobby from arthritis, the fingers starting to bend the wrong way.

I said, "I'm here about the Riordan killing."

"We don't have anything new on it."

"How about a look at the folder?"

"Not a chance."

"Why?"

"I'm supposed to help you and encourage every citizen's not satisfied with our work to go out and hire private?"

Which would just create more work for him. "How about what everybody else knows anyway?"

An explosion of breath. "Look, Cuddy. Simple case. Some crackheads come calling, the good Father knows them, so he lets them in and gets whacked in the temple for his trouble. We didn't find a weapon on the premises, so they came in knowing they were going to hit him. Christ, this Riordan did good deeds among them over at St. Damian's. What the hell did he expect they'd do?"

"Monsignor McNulty tells me whoever did him got his chalice and a notebook computer. Anything else?"

"Not that we're told. The punk fences the chalice, though, and he's ours. Real identifiable, according to McNulty, gold with a heavy base."

"They killed him, you'd think they'd dump the chalice and move the computer."

"Maybe they will."

"In which case, why bother to take the chalice at all?"

Smollett just stared at me.

"And," I said, "if they're going to mug him, why not around St. D's instead of in Meade where they'd need transportation and kind of stand out?"

"Stand out? You kidding? Our own kids dress like they watch *Colors* on the VCR every night."

"You talk with the people at St. Damian's?"

"One of my detectives did, with a Boston cop as shotgun guard. Nobody knows anything, everybody alibis everybody else. All in bed after saying their prayers."

"Riordan's effects tell you anything?"

"What, you think the crackheads sent him a note in advance or something? 'Hey, Padre-man, try to be in around three so Tyrone and me can axe you a question.'"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My day to let things pass. "Any objection to my going through Father Riordan's things, then?"

"Be my guest. Have them bronzed, all I care."

Another wave of the crabbed hand told me the interview was over.

Winding back through the brick-and-clapboard center of Meade, I saw what Smollett meant about dress code. Baggy athletic pants and oversized sweatshirts, baseball caps worn backward. Only there was a desperately casual note in the way the town's teens wore the clothes and the colors. As though they were trying to be something they weren't, but feared.

At the church annex, Monsignor McNulty took me to Father Riordan's office. Same architecture, and for my money, better view, since it looked onto the oaks and maples in the back. It also was more utilitarian and modern, with a fax machine and computer printer to either side of a gap on top of the metal credenza behind the desk.

I walked toward the credenza and pointed at the gap, what looked like fingerprint powder still dusted onto it. "This where Father Riordan kept his computer?"

"When he wasn't carrying it around in that thing."

There was a black vinyl case with a shoulder strap slumped into the corner. Crossing to it, I bent down. A couple of small diskettes, pencils, pen, paper clips. The short version of a manual for the machine itself. No paper copies of anything.

Straightening up, I said, "Where would Father Riordan keep his chalice?"

"Generally in the sacristy, but sometimes here, when he'd clean it properly."

I came back to the desk. "He have an appointment book?"

"Not that I know of. Frank had no head for figures, but a wonderful mind for events and responsibilities. A real people person."

Usually from someone McNulty's age that label would be sarcastic. No hint of it, though.

I pointed to a photo on the desktop. It showed the monsignor standing next to a husky man of thirty or so, winning smile under a craggily handsome brow and piercing eyes. Both wore Roman collars, the handsome man's arm around McNulty's shoulders. "Is that Father Riordan with you?"

"Yes."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Good likeness?"

"Taken less than a year past."

There was a large, polished seashell next to the photo. In it were scattered coins, more paper clips, a matchbook, some tooth-chewed pencils, and a set of keys on a tag.

I picked up the keys. "These belong to him?"

"Yes."

On the back of the key tag were handwritten numbers. 219-9256. "This number mean anything to you?"

McNulty squinted at it, angling his face for the light. "What, telephone, is it?"

"Probably."

"No. Not one of our exchanges here in Meade, anyway."

"Your area code's five-oh-eight, right?"

"Right."

"Can I use this phone?"

"Certainly."

I punched in 219-9256. The nice lady with the atonal voice told me that my call could not be completed as dialed. I added "1" as a prefix, and tried again. Same message. Tried area code 617 for Boston, 401 for Rhode Island, and 603 for New Hampshire. Same each time.

Hanging up, I hefted the keys. "Can I take these with me?"

"I don't see why not."

The matchbook caught my eye. It showed York's Tavern, with an address in Boston. Not far from St. Damian's House, as a matter of fact. "You recognize this place?"

Another squint. "No, but Frank wasn't above a beverage now and then." A weak smile.

I didn't get any smell of tobacco in the office. "You said Father Riordan belonged to a health club?"

"That's right. Meade Health and Fitness, near Route 128."

"He wasn't a smoker, then."

"Never. Wouldn't even let me smoke my pipe in here. Why?"

"Probably nothing." I pocketed the matchbook and the keys. "Can I take that photo, too?"

A frown. "Of Frank and me?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"I'd like to be able to show it to anybody I speak to."

McNulty chewed on that. "Could you have it copied and returned

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to me?" A sheepish look. "I'm not sure I have another print."

"Sure."

As I slipped off the cardboard backing, the muted sound of organ music began throbbing through the wall. I realized I hadn't heard it on this visit to Our Lady. "Who's playing?"

"Theresa. Lovely, isn't it?"

"Her last name?"

"T-U-G-L-I-O. I spell it because people want to pronounce the letters 'Tug-*lee*-oh' but she says it '*Tool*-ee-oh.'"

"Did Ms. Tuglio know Father Riordan?"

"Yes." A welling in the eyes again. "I'm afraid his death has left no one untouched."

I told Monsignor McNulty that I wanted to speak to Theresa Tuglio without him. The October sun was bright coming through the high windows, creating shafts of light and shadow, and even though I'd taken the short, inside corridor into the church itself, my eyes still took a moment to adjust. The calliope tubes of the organ soared up the altar's rear wall. From the altar rail, I couldn't see the person playing.

Moving slowly around the railing, I cleared a stout stone pillar. A woman of thirty or so sat on the organ bench, but just barely. Her hands slashed through the air at the keyboard while her dangling feet pumped pedals like a contestant in the Tour de France. Small-boned, her hair was drawn back and up into a bun, the cardigan sweater, skirt, and shoes sensible rather than stylish.

At a break in the chords, I said, "Ms. Tuglio?"

The woman jumped, hands off the keys and clasped in her lap, turning sideways in fright to face me.

"I'm sorry if I startled you."

"Who are you?"

"John Cuddy. I didn't see you when I came in."

"You're not supposed to." A shy smile. "The organ itself is tucked away over here so the priest can cue me but the parishioners won't notice me."

Tuglio said the last part as though she were relieved by that. The index finger and thumb of her right hand traced a brass button on the cardigan, a script "T" on it and the other buttons as well. "Can I help you with something, Mr. Cuddy?"

"Monsignor McNulty has asked me to look into Father Riordan's death."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What animation had remained in Tuglio's face from the organ-playing drained from it, and she closed her eyes. "It hurts just to think about Father that way."

"Were you here the afternoon it happened?"

The eyes opened. "Yes. Playing. Practicing, I tell the Monsignor. But really just enjoying. That's part of the tragedy. If I hadn't been making so much noise, perhaps someone would have heard. . . ." She shook her head. "But I love playing." A hand swept up toward the rear of the altar. "My dad was a metal-worker, like his father before him. My grandfather helped cast those pipes, and my dad maintained them."

"Can you tell me anything at all about Father Riordan?"

A slow intake of breath. "A fine man. Sympathetic, empathetic. Everyone's dream of a young priest."

I got something else from Tuglio's tone of voice. "Any recent changes? Depression, nervousness?"

"No. If anything, just the opposite. What was the word in . . . Oh yes, 'ebullient.' Father was generally in good spirits, but that Tuesday, and even the day before, he'd been excited, as though he'd just discovered the secret to life." A pause. "I wish he'd shared it with me."

Secret, or life, I thought. Then, from the look she gave me, maybe both. Reaching into my pocket, I took out Riordan's keys. "Ms. Tuglio, do you recognize these?"

Her head canted a little. "A set of keys? No."

"Monsignor McNulty said they were Father Riordan's."

"Then they must be."

I turned over the tab. "Does this number mean anything to you?"

Tuglio read it, moving her lips. "No."

I tried the matchbook. "Did Father Riordan ever mention this place to you?"

"York's? No, but my brother has."

"Your brother?"

"Anthony. He goes there sometimes, to get a better feel for what his kids have been through."

"His kids?"

"The boys at St. Damian's. He's the executive director there."

3.

It was a toss-up whether to start at York's Tavern or St. Damian's House. The tavern came up first, on a street with a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

closed mill and a limping steel-fabrication plant.

There was no parking lot for York's, the cars just left half on the street, half on the sidewalk. Outside, the windows were diamond-shaped, too small to crawl through and covered by chicken-wire mesh in a hopeful attempt to block rocks. A short-circuiting neon beer sign hung inside the glass of one, the first and last letters of the brewer's name cut off by the narrowness of the window itself.

The front door had three of the diamond windows. I looked inside before opening it. Nearly full, and mine would be the only jacket and tie. I went in anyway.

The conversation died a bit as I moved through the crowd to the bar, then picked up again when I signaled the keep for a beer. About forty, squat and balding, he brought a draft of the brand in the window. Reaching under the counter with his free hand, he dealt a coaster to land like a playing card just in front of my elbows, then raised two fingers in a victory sign as he set the mug on the coaster. I laid a ten on the bar, and he went to the register with it, coming back with a five and three ones. As he arranged the change near my glass, I showed him the photo from Father Riordan's desk.

The keep slung a towel over his right shoulder. "You a cop?"

"Private. Just want to know if you've seen either of these men in here."

"The big one, yeah. Wouldn't have thought he was a priest, though."

"Why not?"

"He come through the door in a ski sweater, the other with him wearing this nice navy blazer. I was afraid they might draw a little action."

"For what?"

"For dressing that way. The boys don't like yuppies slumming around their watering hole."

"Like me in this suit."

"Yeah, and you could feel the boys reacting, couldn't you?"

"But not starting anything."

"You look like a cop. And besides, it's early yet."

"What time was it when these two were in here?"

"Early Monday night, last week. I remember account of they kept a table for the football game, then left in the fourth quarter. The other guy got kind of stiff, but the big guy watching the tube, I had the feeling he played somewhere."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He did. Can you describe the other guy?"

"More like a priest than your friend there, I didn't know better."

"Know better?"

"The other guy's named Tuglio. Tall and skinny, comes in here from time to time. Kind of 'researching' us, I always thought. But he don't usually get slammed, and he does a good job for the kids over to St. D's, so I try and watch out for him."

"With the clientele."

"Yeah. Only one look at your big guy there, and I didn't see anybody messing with them."

"Because of the big guy's size."

"And the attitude, you know? Your priest there, he just carried himself right. A guy with a hard laugh, kind of on edge."

"On edge?"

"Yeah, like he was excited about something, ready to play." The keep looked at me. "Kind of guy could handle himself, he had to."

I told the keep I appreciated his time and left the change on the bar.

"Thank you, June."

The woman smiled and closed the door behind me as the man at the desk sneezed into a handkerchief. "Sorry, this cold. Believe me, you don't want to shake hands, but Anthony Tuglio."

"John Cuddy, Mr. Tuglio."

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking into the death of Father Frank Riordan."

Tuglio's features drained of color the way his sister's had of animation. Tall and skinny like the bartender had said, with black, fine hair combed across. His shirt looked pressed and his tie was snugged up to the collar button despite his cold. A tweed sports jacket hung from a hook over files stacked on a low cabinet.

Tuglio said, "Look, I don't want to be rude." Another pass with the handkerchief. "But your people have already gone through this place like Sherman's army, assuming that one of my—"

"Not to interrupt, but I'm a private investigator, not a cop. Monsignor McNulty's asked me to look into this for him."

Tuglio seemed to process that. "Why?"

"He's concerned that the police may have moved Father Riordan's case to the back burner."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A shake of the head, his sister's mannerisms evident in him. "A priest is killed, and even that goes to the 'back burner.'" Tuglio's eyes seemed to wander. "My God."

"Mr. Tuglio?"

He came back into focus. "Yes?"

"What can you tell me about Father Riordan?"

"Frank? Salt of the earth, a prince of the church. We're not part of the archdiocese here at the House, but we get some funding and a lot of honorable mentions. Well, Frank Riordan put his time where his mouth was. Organized a basketball tournament for the boys, always interested in how they were doing in school. And we weren't even in his parish."

"I understand you saw him the night before he died?"

His sister's shy smile. "Yes. We played telephone tag during the day, and when we finally connected, he said he wanted to have a drink, talk about something."

"What was it?"

"I never really found out. This cold must have been sneaking up on me, because when he suggested York's—it's a tavern just down the street?—I said sure. Well, it's kind of a rough place, but Frank didn't seem to mind. We sat and watched the Monday night game and must have talked."

"Must have?"

"Well, like I said, this cold was creeping up on me, I guess, because the beer really hit me. I remember Frank saying something about the prior weekend; what, I couldn't tell you."

"When did you leave York's?"

"I'm not sure. I was so stiff, Frank had to drive me home."

"You live here at St. Damian's?"

"No. Over in West Roxbury. I usually leave my car at the apartment and take a bus to work."

"So Father Riordan drove you home in his car."

"Correct."

"Could he have gone somewhere else after that?"

Tuglio thought about it. "I'd say not. I remember the game going to the fourth quarter at York's, so it would have been pretty late."

I took out the keys. "This number mean anything to you?"

Tuglio read it aloud. "No. No exchange I've ever heard of."

"But a phone number."

"What?"

"You figure it's a phone number."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Written that way? What else could it be?"

Good point. "When was this basketball tournament?"

"That Saturday."

"Two days before you had drinks with him at York's."

"Yes. The health club woman out there—a Ms. Steinberg?—was very helpful, but said it had to be before the real season started, when her members were still interested more in outdoor tennis and televised football."

"Can I speak to some of the boys who were in the tournament?"

Tuglio gave me a steady look. "Mr. Cuddy, Frank's death has already upset them badly, and the police only made matters that much worse."

"It might help me."

He looked down. "All right, but please, be gentle with them."

"Do my best."

Tuglio nodded before sneezing again into the handkerchief.

4.

"Yo, man, how's it going?"

DeVonne was a solid black kid, maybe thirteen, with the long, graceful arm muscles of an all-around athlete hanging loosely from the sleeves of a rapper's T-shirt. DeVonne also wore an Oakland Raiders cap, reversed but slightly cockeyed, black vinyl warm-up pants, and scuffed Air Jordans. We sat across from each other in a small room at St. Damian's that was just a cut above a police station interrogation cell.

"DeVonne, my name's John Cuddy, and I'd like to ask you some questions about the basketball tournament you were in at the Meade Health and Fitness Club."

"Not *in*, man. We *won* the mother." A sly look. "You here about the holy man, right?"

"Right."

"Take it to the bank, we didn't have nothing to do with that dude getting chilled."

"Why would I think you did?"

"Aw, come on, man. Who do you think you talking at? Russian mothers set off a nuke, we'd be the ones get the blame."

"Tell me about the tournament, DeVonne."

He crossed his arms, stretching out in the chair like it was a lounger. "Mr. T loads us on the bus—"

"Mr. Tuglio?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yeah, man. That's what we call the dude, like after Mr. T on *The A-Team,* account of the two mens couldn't be no more different, you know what I'm saying?"

"Go on."

"So, Mr. T, he loads us on the bus, and we ride on out there to the country, and he thinks we're all like gonna be so impressed, we grow up and be good suburban executives. But the club was okay, this foxy chick owner give us sandwiches and stuff. Then we play the tournament."

"Who else was there?"

"The other kids from here, some old priest, and this kind of stale chick, couldn't take her eyes off the holy man got killed."

"The other woman, you know who she was?"

"The stale chick? Heard your holy man call her Terry."

Theresa Tuglio. "You hear anything else, DeVonne?"

"Holy man, he knew something about the game, account of he was coaching the other team we beat, and he had them playing good against us. Mr. T, he try to coach us, and we try not to hear him so he don't mess up our rhythm, you know what I'm saying?"

"You like Father Riordan?"

A shrug. "He was okay. Acted a little funny sometimes."

"Funny how?"

Another shrug. "I don't know. Always grabbing at you, arm around the shoulder, trying to make you feel like he was your best friend. And I got to admit, for a white honky holy man, he did some good things."

It was the first time DeVonne smiled in the time I'd been talking to him.

I wasn't sure if Estevan had ever smiled. He was a slight, pale Latino kid, fifteen according to Anthony Tuglio, but I thought a ticket-taker at a movie theater might let him in for the under-twelve price. Black tie shoes, white socks, frayed dress shirt with the collar button fastened. Sitting like a West Point plebe at dinner, Estevan kept rubbing his thin wrists under the shirt cuffs.

"I don't mean to make you nervous, Estevan."

"I'm not."

"Can you tell me about the basketball tournament?"

"We went out there. Everybody had to go."

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Tuglio said Father had gone to a lot of troubles to get this

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

chance for us, so everybody had to go and everybody had to play."

"Father Riordan, you mean?"

Looking down at his shoes, Estevan nodded.

"Do you enjoy basketball?"

He shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Don't like sports. Like books."

"What kind of books?"

Estevan looked up. "Kind Father used to bring to me. All kinds."

Something felt off with the boy. "Are you sorry about him being killed?"

Estevan looked down again, nodding.

"Can you tell me anything that might help find who killed him?"

"No." He shivered and looked back up. "Can I go now?"

"Estevan—"

He got up and left, without turning back to me.

Kurt never stopped smiling. If you include grinning and leering.

"So, you want to know about the croaked priest, huh?"

I stared at the grinning blond kid, hair buzzed all around except for a short, braided pigtail at the back. Dressed in a riverboat shirt and jeans, he was maybe Estevan's age, but as aggressive as the other boy was passive. "What can you tell me, Kurt?"

"Hey, not much. I don't even know if Kurt's my real name. Around here, Mr. T takes one look at you and puts you in the 'proper place.'" Kurt said the last word with a lisping sound.

"You don't like Mr. Tuglio?"

"I don't like faggots. Old ones, young ones." Kurt closed the top button of his riverboat shirt the way Estevan had worn his, then opened it again.

As I wondered how Kurt would get along with Monsignor McNulty, he leered. "Too bad this shirt doesn't have a collar that turns, too."

I stopped. "What do you mean?"

"Hey, forget it, all right?" Grinning again, Kurt began circling the tip of his index finger into his thumb pad. "It's not like you're paying me for all this, huh?"

Lovely boy. "Did Father Riordan ever approach you sexually?"

"Hey, like I said, forget it. I ain't telling you nothing."

"How about the basketball tournament, then?"

"What about it? Big surprise: the bro's won."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"DeVonne's team."

"Right. We could have beaten them, too, we didn't have Es-te-van dragging us down."

"How?"

"Your dead priest made everybody play, and Es-*te*-van's worse than having nobody. Four on five, we'd have had a better chance."

"You notice anything else about the tournament?"

"Notice?" Another leer. "Just the way this wannabe babe watched your croaked priest."

"Who was that?"

"He called her Terry, I think. Yeah, Terry. I swear, you'd think she wet her pants every time he looked her way, much less talked to her. Ugly thing, too, and old. Probably lucky even a priest gave her anything."

"Anything?"

Kurt made the leer harder. "You ever heard of the horizontal mambo? I think that's what she wanted to dance with him."

5.

I left the Prelude in the parking area of the Meade Health and Fitness Club and went through the main entrance. Nautilus and aerobics rooms visible in front of me, arrows and signs for locker rooms on the walls.

A striking woman wearing a long-sleeved designer jersey and spandex tights turned toward me from behind a low counter to my right. She was five-six or so and trying hard to look only thirty, with a mane of black curly hair and jangly earrings.

Out came a perky smile. "Hi, help you with a membership?"

"No, thanks. Ms. Steinberg?"

"Yes?"

"My name's John Cuddy, and I'd just like to talk with you about something."

The smile drooped. "Look, we're pretty much full up with personal trainers right now."

"I'm flattered, but it's about Father Francis Riordan."

The whole face drooped, showing her years. "What a way to spoil the day. Police?"

"Private investigator. Monsignor McNulty asked me to look into things for him."

"How about some identification?"

I showed it to her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"All right, come on in the office." Steinberg motioned a guy in an identical jersey over to the counter, then inclined her head toward a doorway behind it.

Inside the office, Steinberg flopped down on a futuristic desk chair while I took one of the more staid visitor's ones. "Okay," she said, "what do you want to know?"

"Tell me about Frank Riordan."

"Tell you about him. Adonis with a personality, that help? He was Jewish, I'd have tied him to a bed until . . ." She bit off the next phrase. "Sorry, that was just the way . . ." A wave of the hand, enough like Chief Smollett's that I noticed it.

"How did the basketball tournament come about?"

"Talked me into it. Personality, charm, Frank had it all. I should have had my head shrunk for listening to him, but it was good for the heart. Seeing the kids, I mean, watching them feel important. And what did it cost me? Some food, some drinks, an afternoon of electricity for the lights and the scoreboard. Thanks to God no one got hurt, or the insurance company would have fried my . . ." Another bite.

"Ms. Steinberg—"

"Joyce."

"Joyce, did anything happen during the tournament?"

"Happen? Happen. No, I just told you, we got through it without—"

"I don't mean injuries. I mean, did Father Riordan seem different to you, anything like that?"

Steinberg put an elbow on the arm of her chair, cupping her chin in her hand. "Well, he seemed excited about the tournament."

"Excited."

"Yes, that everything went so well, everybody played, everybody had a good time. More so on Tuesday, if that's possible."

"Tuesday?"

"The day he got killed. He was here in the morning, to work out. Said, 'Hi,' seemed on top of the world." Steinberg made a face. "That boss of his, though, the monsignor? He was kind of a wet blanket during the tournament, looked more worried than I was about the kids breaking something or getting hurt."

"Was there anybody else involved?"

"Involved? Involved." Steinberg nodded. "Yes, now that you mention it. There was this woman, kind of parched-looking, standing off to the side. I went up to her, see if she wanted something, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Frank called her over. 'Terry,' I think was how he called her."

"And?"

"And she stayed by him most of the rest of the time. She had it bad for him."

"Bad?"

"Bad, bad, bad. But I don't think Frank really noticed." Steinberg smiled at me, a little coy. "Lots of the really good ones don't, you know."

I took out the set of keys. "You recognize these?"

"What, keys? Keys are keys, right?"

"These belonged to Father Riordan."

"So, it's some surprise to you that Frank had keys?"

"How about this number on the tag?"

Steinberg looked at it. "Sure."

"Sure?"

"Sure, I know what it stands for. Frank had no head for numbers."

"And so?"

"And so, all the changes of clothes the man had to go through, I told him he could have one of his own. I tell you, though, the other—"

"One of his own what?"

"I'm telling you, all right? We got over nine hundred members here, I can't have one for each, so there's three hundred in the men's and another hundred in the women's—they don't like to change as much in front of each other—but if word got out that Frank—"

"—had his own locker."

Steinberg looked at me as if I were a very slow learner. "Of course, his own locker. Number 219."

"And the other four numbers?"

"His combination. Right-nine, left-twenty-five, right-six. The man was just terrible with numbers, like I told you."

"Ms. Steinberg—"

"Joyce, remember?"

"Joyce, can I see his locker?"

"Sure." The coy smile. "Of course, I can't come with you."

At number 219, I spun the padlock's dial a few times, then tried the combination. The hasp clicked ajar, so I pulled off the lock and opened the door.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Musty air of sweat and fresh tang of deodorant. T-shirt, gym shorts, jockstrap. And next to his running shoes, a red envelope the size of a birthday card, but somewhat heavier as I picked it up.

The envelope was addressed simply "T.T.," and inside it was a card. The cover read, "Thank you . . ." and opening it, the greeting continued, ". . . For the Time of My Life!!!" After the signature, "Yours always, Frank," was a P.S.: "The enclosed came off just 'before,' but I stuck it in my pocket and didn't remember it till I was changing at the club. Can I help you stick it back on?"

I hefted the enclosure in the envelope. It was a bright brass button with a scripted "T" on it.

Just like the one on Theresa Tuglio's cardigan sweater.

6.

Getting out of the Prelude, I could hear muted organ music coming from the church, so I went to it instead of the annex. Inside the doorway, deep chords pounded and bounced around the empty, cavernous space. Given the cover of sound, Theresa Tuglio again wasn't aware of me approaching her.

I said, "Ms. Tuglio?"

She turned as she had the first time, startled, a different sweater on today, her hands clasped in her lap. "Mr. Cuddy? What is it?"

Reaching into my jacket pocket, I said, "There's something here you ought to see. From Frank Riordan's locker at the health club."

I handed her just the envelope containing the card. She noticed the initials on the outside, then opened it and took out the card. Mouthing the words, she stopped, shook her head, and glanced down at the bottom. More shaking, then a bewildered look up at me. "That's Father's signature."

"Yes. This was the 'enclosure.'"

I held up the button.

"But . . ." Tuglio glanced down at her sweater, even though it didn't have any buttons on it. "But I'm not missing any of mine."

"Any of yours?"

"Yes. My dad made those for both . . . Oh. Oh, no."

The expression on her face made me realize the same thing she did.

"What . . . what are you doing here?"

"The House said you were home sick today, Mr. Tuglio."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We were on the third floor of a three-decker in West Roxbury. He sneezed into the handkerchief. "Yes, I'm afraid this is getting worse instead of better, so I thought I ought to stay here, try to beat it. Don't know when the last time—"

"Can I come in?"

A hesitation, then, "Certainly."

The living room was tastefully decorated. Furniture, prints on the wall, some small sculptures on end tables and mantel. Tuglio gestured toward an easy chair as he perched on the edge of a couch cushion. "How can I help you?"

"I should have seen it, Monsignor McNulty telling me Frank Riordan loved to use nicknames. That'd make you 'Tony,' right?"

Tuglio stiffened. "What are you talking about?"

Handing him the envelope and card, I palmed the button. As he read, I held out my fist, turning it up and opening my fingers.

Seeing the button, Tuglio closed his eyes, his head going left-right-left, slow motion. "Oh, Frank."

"Can you tell me about it?"

Tuglio kept his eyes closed. "I could always sense something about Frank, a pent-up energy that verged on anger. I thought I knew what it was, and I was right. But just before his damned basketball tournament, I got the results back from a test." Tuglio now looked up at me. "An anonymous test."

I said, "Blood test."

A tiny nod. "HIV-positive. I don't know why it took me so long to tumble to it. I hadn't been feeling well for a while, but you don't want to know, not after you've had so many friends . . ."

Tuglio shook it off, spoke with more juice. "Anyway, Frank was on the edge of coming out, to himself, I guess, and he made certain . . . overtures during the tournament time we spent out at the health club. I agreed to meet him for a drink Monday night." Tuglio looked away from me. "I was going to ask him about . . . try to get some advice, some guidance, but he was in such a buoyant mood, I couldn't bring myself to bring it up."

"So you two watched the football game at York's."

"And I got drunk, and Frank had to drive me home. I'm not . . . I'm not sure what happened how after that. Here, I mean. I do know we had . . . Well, one thing led to another. I swear to you, though, I never . . . I didn't think about the possibility . . ." Tuglio's voice trailed away.

"But the next day, you decided to tell him."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I had to, and I did. I drove to work that Tuesday morning because with the hangover, I was late as it was. At lunch, I slipped out of St. Damian's and drove to Meade. From the driveway, I could hear Theresa practicing in the church itself, so I parked around back by Frank's office in the annex. I went in; he seemed so glad to see me. He was . . . he was packing up, putting some things in a box on his desk."

"Things like his chalice."

Tuglio flinched. "Yes. I asked Frank what he was doing, and he said, 'Getting started on a new life. Here.' He showed me the draft of a letter he'd done on his computer. A letter of resignation, saying he'd decided to 'follow his spirit elsewhere,' with me."

"I'm genuinely sorry, Mr. Tuglio."

"Thank you." A hesitation, then, "I tried to tell Frank slowly, indirectly, but it wasn't working, and his face grew . . . Oh, it was like implying to him that he'd made a huge mistake, that Frank was wrong about 'us.' And I couldn't stand that, so I told him flat out, that I . . . that he might have become . . . infected."

"And what did Father Riordan do then?"

Tuglio brought the hand with the handkerchief up to his eyes.

"He went berserk, tried to choke me. I was bent over his desk, fading out of consciousness and scared, Oh God, I was so scared. I reached and felt something heavy and just swung it, to knock Frank off me. But I caught him hard above the ear, and the base of his chalice was so heavy, his eyes just rolled up into his head, and he just . . . went down . . . ."

"So you had to take the chalice."

"And the computer. I didn't know his system, and anyway I couldn't take a chance on what else he might have written. So I threw everything including the draft letter into the packing box and just got out of there."

"Where's the box now?"

"In the basement here. I have a storage area."

I leaned forward. "How do you want to handle this?"

"My life's as short or as long as it's going to be, Mr. Cuddy. But I don't think I can stand a trial. I'll just—"

"Maybe there won't be any prosecution."

Tuglio searched my eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, the police have no suspects, including you. If I bring Father Riordan's box back to the church, it'll be up to Monsignor McNulty to do something about it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tuglio was trying to process what I'd said. And meant. "Won't the . . . That is, the police—"

"Will be coming or not, depending on what my client does. But I need for you to give me the box of Father Riordan's things."

Anthony Tuglio sat back on his couch, trying to decide what would make the rest of his life better. Or worse.

When Monsignor McNulty opened the annex door, I went through it, carrying the closed box in front of me.

"Mr. Cuddy, what's going on?"

I moved into his office and set the box on the chair I'd used during my first visit there. "How do you mean?"

"Theresa was here not an hour ago. Beside herself, crying so hard I couldn't make sense of her."

"Better sit down, Monsignor."

"And what's all this?" he said, indicating the box.

"Please. Sit."

He went around his desk and lowered himself into the seat.

I opened a flap of the box and with a handkerchief of my own, lifted out the chalice.

McNulty started out of his chair. "Frank's . . . ? It is, my God in Heaven, where—"

"Let me tell you." And I did.

McNulty sagged halfway through, burying his face in his hands by the end. "No. No, Frank, no, no . . ."

"What do you want to do?"

"Do?" McNulty dropped his hands to the desktop. "I want the killer punished. Or I did. But this, this . . . abomination. It's unbelievable."

"I believe it, but you're the client."

McNulty seemed lost. "Meaning?"

"Meaning no matter how bad it looks or will sound, I think it was self-defense. And everything will come out. Or be whispered about via the media and word of mouth."

"But, but I've never . . . What should I do?"

"Sleep on it. Call me tomorrow."

Turning, I left the office and went through the annex door to the outside world. On my way, Monsignor Joseph McNulty had begun to cry, and I wasn't sorry when the closing door sealed that sound within his house of stone. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE DRUM

by David Ely

The beat was steady and low-pitched. Mr. Chance suspected that he must have heard it long before he became consciously aware of it. How long before—days or even weeks—he had no idea. Nor could he be sure where it came from. It seemed sometimes to rise out of the marshes, sometimes from the scrub woods beyond the old sawmill; at other times it seemed to float down from Great Hill, a rise of land that overlooked the country club.

Mr. Chance had thought at first that it came from a construction job, but he realized it didn't have any of the whine or stutter or boom of cutting or digging equipment, and it kept on going, day in and day out. He even heard it at night. It didn't annoy him; actually, he found its regularity somewhat soothing.

He mentioned it to his friends around town, but no one else seemed to be aware of it, except for Jake Stolles, the druggist, who said he thought he heard it now and then. L. B. Knowles, the police

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

chief, who was deaf in one ear, said he hadn't noticed it, but from Mr. Chance's description he said it might be drumming.

"Could be a couple of Indian boys out there," he said. "Got their drum going. You know—practicing. I haven't heard that in years, though."

Mr. Stolles said he doubted it was drumming because there were hardly any Indians left in town, and most of them were old-timers. Besides, he said, there wasn't any singing, and didn't Indians drum and sing at the same time?

One never knows how to categorize a David Ely story. As his agent puts it, "his work is wonderfully off center." He always skirts the edge of the mystery/suspense genre, offering pieces that are eerie and threatening even when a crime is only hinted at. One of Mr. Ely's early novels, *Seconds*, became a movie starring Rock Hudson. Also see *Journal of the Flood Year* (1992). ✝

The only Indian John Chance knew personally was Charley Bartlett, who worked part-time at the post office and had been chief some years ago when the tribe had lost its land suit against the town. One day Mr. Chance asked him about the drumming.

"What drumming?" Mr. Bartlett said.

Mr. Chance got him to come out from behind the counter and through the little lobby to the walkway outside. "Now you can hear it," he said. "That sound out there. That's a beat like a drumbeat."

"I don't hear it," Mr. Bartlett said.

"Well, it's not very loud," Mr. Chance said, thinking that the old man was probably hard of hearing, "but who's out there drumming? You know who'd be doing that?"

Mr. Bartlett shook his head. "Not us," he said. He was a big man with a heavy, solemn face, deeply wrinkled. "We don't drum anymore," he said, and he went back in the post office.

Mr. Chance, who was the town's leading realtor, had plenty of things to think about besides the drumming (if that's what it was). Business had been slumping for months.

More people were moving out of town than were coming in, which meant residential prices were falling, and many properties were sitting around unsold. Mr. Chance had made a small fortune in the town in the past fifteen years, but he was holding too much property himself right now, principally the Great Hill development, and he was starting to worry.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He drove up Great Hill later in the afternoon. The autumn sun was hot there. He left his jacket in the car and walked around the place in his shirtsleeves, glancing at the unsold houses on empty streets where weeds crowded the edges of the asphalt. The view was fine—the country club with its golf greens and fairways down below, and the creek that meandered toward the town beyond, with the Beetleback range of hills in the distance. The view, yes, but water and sewage problems had jacked up costs—and now the only three buyers were moving out, anxious to sell at almost any price.

Mr. Chance was a thick man, with a bulldog face and meaty hands that by habit he clenched and opened as he walked around, wondering what to do. Cut prices some more? Wait for an upturn in land value?

It was quiet up there. Not a sound—except the drumming. A soft, steady beat, like wings on air, like waves against the shore.

Nothing moved. There wasn't a soul in sight, not even a bird. Just these hollow houses, empty streets. Turning, Mr. Chance saw someone at the edge of a thicket of pine trees that sat on the crown of the hill. A man was standing there. Mr. Chance thought of calling out something—a greeting, an inquiry—but did not. He paused to draw his sleeve across his face to wipe the sweat away. When he looked again, the figure was nowhere to be seen.

"He was a tall fellow," Mr. Chance told his wife at supper that evening, "and his hair was kind of long. Dark hair, pulled back and tied behind his neck. Like an Indian, come to think of it."

"They used to live up there. That's what Mrs. Worthy told me."

"I don't think they lived there. They hunted up there or used it for their ceremonies, but Lord, that's twenty years ago or more, when this town was just a wide spot in the road."

"This must have been a pretty place," said Mrs. Chance, "before the trees were cut down."

"We didn't cut all the trees, Shirley. There are some left. Anyway, you've got to utilize your resources."

Mrs. Chance, having heard her husband's views many times, listened with a patient smile.

"Why, when this was a mostly Indian town," Mr. Chance went on, "they had a one-room schoolhouse and one paved road and a tumbledown general store, and the whole shebang wasn't worth a plugged nickel. But we've got a solid tax base now. We've got value and we've got conveniences. You can't live without conveniences."

"They did."

"Ha," said Mr. Chance. "You think they were better off? Why,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

they were selling beaded stuff to the tourists then. That's all they had for income. And we brought in service industries and the sawmill and the textile mill—"

"That didn't last long."

"All right, we lost the textile mill, but you can't win 'em all."

"The Dixons are going to Cleveland," said Mrs. Chance. "Naomi told me today."

"Moving away? They're leaving?"

"And Estelle Faber. She said she and George have about decided to go to Florida."

"That can't be," said Mr. Chance. "George would never leave."

"Estelle said he says the fishing's about gone, and that's what he cares about. He says it's all the runoff from the lawns and golf greens, it's poisoned the marsh and got the bay shore choked with weeds and done something to the bottom so the fish can't feed."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Chance. "There are plenty of fish." Then he cocked his head. "Hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"That drumming. Hear it?"

"I don't hear anything," said Mrs. Chance.

Mr. Chance continued to wonder about the long-haired man on Great Hill. There weren't more than a dozen Indian families left, living near the sawmill, and he thought he knew all the adults by sight. He'd never seen that fellow before, though. He mentioned the intruder (as he had come to think of the man) to several people around town. The druggist, Mr. Stolles, remembered he'd seen a dark-skinned man down by the creek, just beyond the fifteenth green on the golf course.

"Indian man?" asked Mr. Chance.

"Could be," said Mr. Stolles.

"Bet it was."

"Well, he wasn't tall like yours," Mr. Stolles said. "He was sort of squat-shaped, nobody I'd ever seen before, and he just stood there, not hiding or anything, just watching. It sort of distracted me. Made me miss my putt."

Mr. Chance frowned at this, and addressed himself to Police Chief Knowles. "It might be something to look into," he said. "I mean, if we've got a couple of vagrants in town—"

"We don't know they're vagrants," said the chief.

"They're strangers, and they don't live here. Maybe they're the ones doing the drumming. I tell you, I don't like it. That

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

drumming—it's a public nuisance. I didn't mind it at first, but now it keeps me awake at night."

"I can't hear it. You hear it, Jake?"

"Not at night," said Mr. Stolles.

"Well, I hear it," said Mr. Chance, "and when I don't actually hear it, I'm aware of it."

"Oh, hell, John," said the chief. "Let 'em drum if that's all they want to do. What else have they got, anyhow?"

"What have they got?" said Mr. Chance. "Why, they've got the same as we have as citizens of the town."

"They may not see it that way," said the chief. "This used to be their town."

"It wasn't theirs," said Mr. Chance. "They didn't own it. We proved that in the land suit, didn't we? And what evidence did they have? Just a wad of old papers all creased and folded so you couldn't make them out, and then that moldy old rag they said was a treaty. The town lawyer made short work of that, all right."

"That was your lawyer, really, John."

"Well, I went out and got him, L. B. We needed the best land attorney in the state for this. We couldn't afford to lose. We couldn't have built the country club."

"We could have put it somewhere else."

"Anyway, we kept the land, and we improved it. We've got to remember that. We invested. We took risks—with our own money. We created something of value! And now what do we see? We've got vagrants and intruders coming in, and that damned drumming day and night. . . ."

Mr. Chance went on like this for a while, and then he mopped his brow and apologized to his friends for having become overexcited, and headed for his office farther along on Main Street.

There he was informed by his assistant, Miriam Krug, that two buyers had backed out of deals that had been almost concluded, and that Jack Landis, who owned the bakery, wanted to put it on the market. Mr. Chance at once telephoned the bakery. While he was waiting for Mr. Landis to come to the phone, he got a call on his second line from Marshall Pickering, the high-school music teacher, who said he'd gotten a job offer from out of state, and wondered how much Mr. Chance thought he could get for his house.

"What's this town coming to?" Mr. Chance muttered to himself after these calls were concluded. Deals broken! Bakery for sale! No high-school music teacher!

Through the front window he noticed someone standing across

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the street, partly obscured by parked cars. A woman, a dark woman. Facing his way. She was wearing some kind of embroidered shawl. "Miriam," he called out to his assistant at her desk in the corner. "Look out there."

"Where?"

"Across the street. That woman."

A large van was moving by. It passed. Mr. Chance couldn't see the woman now.

"Never mind," he said.

He woke during the night and listened. Couldn't hear it. That didn't mean it wasn't there. He put on his robe and padded out onto the deck above the garage. It was a moonless night: dark, but full of stars. Mr. Chance tried to make out their zodiacal forms—scorpion, archer, goat. The longer he looked, the more his gaze was filled by the brilliance of these giant sparks. They seemed to glow and wink, to twist, to spin toward him in slow profusion, as if the solar system had exploded and its blazing fragments were drifting down on him in a cascade of dazzling light. Now he heard thunder in the distance, with steady steps advancing. No, not thunder. It was the drum. He could hear it from all directions, like the gradual gathering of some great assembly in the sky. He thought he should go back in, but did not move, not for some time, and stood as though mesmerized beneath the plunging stars.

The next afternoon he drove out along the sawmill road. It had once been a trail through the forest, but then the forest was cut down. The road, now paved, ran between patches of secondary growth that had sprung up among the stumps of the old trees.

He reached the cluster of bungalows and cottages that housed what remained of the Native community. Laundry was strung on clotheslines, old cars sat in the yards, children played in the dirt by the roadside. Mr. Chance slowed and stopped. He looked at the women, at the men. He recognized some, although he realized he didn't know their names, except for Mr. Bartlett, who was sitting on his front porch.

Mr. Chance got out of his car and approached the old man, who offered him a chair. Mr. Chance didn't take it. He was looking around, trying to see if he could pick out the people he had noticed—the tall man, the woman in the shawl. He couldn't see them.

"How's business?" Mr. Bartlett said politely.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Just fine," said Mr. Chance, with a smile. Some of the children were around his automobile. He hoped they wouldn't touch it. "Actually," he added, "things aren't booming right now." Mr. Bartlett made no comment. "Take Great Hill, for example," said Mr. Chance. "Three years ago that was a standout property, and we developed it, but now nobody's buying."

He paused for a moment. "Well, I know this may be a sensitive subject for you folks. I mean the land suit. But we won it fair and square in court, didn't we? Tell you what," he said, in sudden inspiration. "How about you people take it over? Live up there for free. Well, for a modest rental. Those houses need maintenance. They're going to pieces up there. If you folks would keep them in shape—you know, a nail or two, a dab of paint—"

Mr. Bartlett was solemnly watching him, but still said nothing. Others had come closer, gathering around so gradually that Mr. Chance hadn't been aware of movement.

"See, this way you could be back there again," said Mr. Chance. "Not as owners—but you could utilize the place. That would be fine with me, and I know I could sell the idea to my partners." He waited for a reaction. There was none. Mr. Bartlett and the others were watching him inquisitively, as if his meaning had to be determined in some way other than by his words. "Know what?" said Mr. Chance with enthusiasm. "How about you make it a sort of Indian village? You know—put up a few wigwams, maybe a totem pole, stuff like that? We could get tourists to go up there at something like ten bucks a head, plus parking, and we could split the proceeds, so there'd be something for you and something for us, and nobody comes away empty-handed. How about that?"

No one said anything. Mr. Chance waited for a few moments. "Well," he said, "think it over. Plenty of time."

The following week Mr. and Mrs. Chance gave a farewell party for the Dixons and the Fabers, who were leaving, too, and for Harry and Leona Hammond, who had just decided to move to New Orleans, where Harry was becoming a partner in his brother's construction business. Many friends and acquaintances had been invited. The Chances' huge living room was crowded. Waiters from the catering service moved about with trays of canapés and drinks.

Mr. Chance, as host, moved from one group to another, smiling and joking. Despite the noise of a score of conversations, he could sense the drumming. He wondered if others were aware of it, but didn't ask. People were talking about the high-school football

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

team, which had lost its first three games, and about a state environmental investigation, which had found that the town's water supply was contaminated. A treatment plant would have to be built, which would mean higher taxes.

"We need to attract new business," said Mr. Chance, and someone laughed. "Hell, John," said Mr. Dixon, "we can't keep what we've got. This town is going down the tubes."

"It was fine while it lasted," said George Faber, who had joined the group. "We've made a bundle. You sure have, John. That lumber deal alone would set a man up for life."

"Well, I've still got plenty tied up in Great Hill," said Mr. Chance. "So do Rob Winston and Jerry Fain. We are damned well going to get it out somehow." He had to go to the kitchen to get some ice. Back in the living room, he found himself next to Mr. Faber. "Tell me, George," he remarked, "do you still hear the drumming?"

"The drumming? Well, John, I don't know if I ever actually heard it," said Mr. Faber.

"Well, sometimes you can't really hear it, so you might have missed it." He chuckled, and nudged Mr. Faber. "I've figured it out, George. They move it around. One night it's down by the bay, and the next it's in the woods. See what I mean? They hide it."

"Think so?" remarked Mr. Faber.

Mr. Chance lifted his glass and spoke in a loud voice. "Here's a toast, everybody. To our friends and neighbors who are moving on. May they find happiness and prosperity wherever they go! And may their places be taken by new friends and neighbors—our future fellow townspeople!"

This raised some mild cheers from the guests, who ceremoniously drank in fellowship.

But as the days and weeks went by, the new people didn't come.

The air grew colder, the shadows longer. Mr. Chance drove up Great Hill to inspect houses for weathering and vandalism. He had a caretaker who came now and then to do urgent repairs—patch a leaky roof, replace a broken pane—but the project, while still intact, had taken on an oddly insubstantial appearance with its curtainless windows and empty little plots of browning grass, as if it were built of cork and cardboard, which one brisk breeze would blow away.

From the overlook at the brow of the hill, Mr. Chance surveyed the view. It was not an encouraging sight. Even in November there were usually some golfers on the greens and fairways of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

country club below, but there weren't any now. Nor were there many vehicles moving along the streets of the town beyond—and although from this distance Mr. Chance couldn't see the pedestrians on Main Street, he knew there'd be just a few, if any, for business was slow, slower than ever. Two more stores had closed. Others had cut business hours and reduced staff. Even the trees along Main Street looked despondent, with their branches stripped of leaves.

The wind now came in gusts, making Mr. Chance's eyes water. Clouds sailed down from the north, sending their shadows racing across the land, darkening everything. Mr. Chance turned his coat collar up. The wind was beating in his ears. It made him step back, unsure of his footing.

Then there was a break in the clouds, and a shaft of sunlight burst through. With it came a rush of warm air. From the overlook Mr. Chance saw in this sudden brilliance the meadows and woods spread beneath him greened and full, and there rose the summery scent of earth, of plants, of trees. A hawk soared high above him. He experienced a moment of confusion. He could not see the country club. He could not see the town. The roads were gone; houses and buildings had vanished.

It was an illusion—a trick of light—something that happened when the clouds broke and the sun dazzled him. He knew that. And it was over in an instant. Now he saw everything as before. What he had created. It was still there. No reason for him to feel this confusion, this unease. He had worries, but they were business worries. Nothing else. Why should he be troubled? If he hadn't come here to develop this land, this town, someone else would have done it.

"You're working too hard, John," Mrs. Chance said that evening. "You need a vacation."

"How can I leave now?"

"You said yourself nothing's moving on the market. Miriam can run the office. Why don't we go to England? I've always wanted to."

"Go back where we came from?" Mr. Chance remarked sarcastically. "They'd like to see us move out, that's for sure."

"What are you talking about? I'm just suggesting a little vacation. As a matter of fact, the Johansons did move back—to Sweden, where their great-grandparents were born—and I don't see why we wouldn't enjoy looking at where our own people had their roots. Who knows? We might like it. We've got to think of our

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

retirement before long, and frankly, I'm not sure I want to stay around here. I just don't have a feeling of belonging in this place. So if it has to be somewhere else, why not England?"

Mr. Chance frowned, but said nothing. He was listening to her, but he was also aware of the drum. It was louder; not much, just a little. Each day, louder.

Driving one day on Meadow Lane, where some of the town's finer homes were, Mr. Chance saw some workmen clustered around Mark Plummer's place. He pulled over and stopped to take a look. They were putting some jacks in there, to raise the house.

He got out of the car and approached Mr. Plummer, who was conferring with the contractor.

"What's the project, Mark?" Mr. Chance asked cheerfully. "Going to extend your basement a bit?"

"We're moving it, John," said Mr. Plummer.

"Moving it?"

"We knew we couldn't sell it here the way things are, so we're moving it to Crystal City. We've got a lot there."

"Moving it?" Mr. Chance gazed at Mr. Plummer, at the jacks, at the workmen. "I see," he said, and returned to his car. It was raining now; a storm was coming. There were flashes of lightning over the Beetleback range. First the people, he thought. Now houses.

Mr. Chance drove cautiously. It was near freezing; there might be icy patches. This wasn't the day he ordinarily went up to Great Hill, but he went up anyway, and drove around, looking at his unsold houses.

Something seemed not quite right to him. He began counting, going along one little street and then another; got mixed up, lost the count, and had to begin again. At the end of each block he stopped and made a note on a sheet of paper. He still wasn't sure. Maybe he'd made a mistake adding them up.

One missing.

He made another round, squinting through the rain-streaked glass.

Now he got the proper count—but on a third circuit he came up with the figure he'd gotten on the first try. One short.

But how? There'd be the foundation, there'd be traces—torn ground, litter, tracks.

He closed his eyes, leaned against the steering wheel; breathing hard, perspiring. *Come up another day,* he thought. Count them again. Get Shirley to help.

He drove back to town, then out along the sawmill road. When

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he reached the Native settlement, he stopped in front of Mr. Bartlett's house and got out. There was nobody in sight. He stood by the car in the cold rain; heavy drops beat against his face, beat on the roof of the car, and now he was aware of the drum. Quick, steady strokes like the rain.

It seemed close now, quite close. He began walking along the road, past the cottages, pausing now and then to listen, then going on, wondering who would be out drumming in the cold and wet.

His shoes were muddy, his head and shoulders were soaked with the rain. He passed the last dwellings and went into the scrub woods that had grown up where the old forest had been cut. The drumbeats seemed to come from every side. He chose a direction at random and pushed his way through the underbrush. There were a few of the original trees back there; they had escaped the saws. He reached them, and stopped. The drum was louder. He expected to see it all now—the drum, the drummers—but there were only the old trees rearing up in a stubble of stumps, their high branches shaking and scraping in the stormy wind.

Mr. Chance went this way, that way, peering through the rain. "I know you're here," he called out. He was going in a circle among the ancient trees. He would seem to glimpse figures moving at the edge of his vision and would swing around to bring them better into view, but he never could quite manage this, for the figures—if they were figures—would slip away and reappear in another corner of his sight, so he turned and twisted there, circling and lurching, until he stumbled over one of the old stumps, and fell.

He lay exhausted in the rain for a time and then slowly started to rise, getting onto his hands and knees.

Someone stood before him.

It was Mr. Bartlett, who had seen him at the road and followed him into the woods, to see if he was all right.

Mr. Chance, smeared with mud and leaves, remained on his knees, gazing up at the other man. The drumming had stopped. There was only the wind and the patter of rain.

"You knew we couldn't last, didn't you?" Mr. Chance said. Mr. Bartlett remained silent, looking down at him. "You knew," Mr. Chance said again. He wiped his face and hair with his hands. "Didn't you?"

There was no answer. Mr. Chance pushed himself upright. The drumming had started again, but from another direction, farther away. Mr. Chance looked around, but he was alone now. Mr. Bartlett had gone, leaving him to find his way out by himself. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE DEADLY SAMARITAN

by William Bankier

This being Los Angeles, Zeke Millman was the only pedestrian on the block. He was a fast walker for a man sixty-five years old. Striding along in white athletic shoes, he swung his arms vigorously. The cars on Fountain Avenue raced by in both directions. One of them was bound to jump the curb some day and take him out from behind. This was Millman's fear, but still he walked on Fountain.

A young man was approaching on foot, moving slowly. He was tall and thin, poorly dressed, a street person. Millman saw blue eyes in a sun-burned face, a determined mouth.

They were past each other. Millman glanced over his shoulder. The drifter turned and ran at him, grasping Millman's right arm, twisting it behind his back in a hammerlock.

The pain and the pressure drove the older man to his knees. "Hey!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "Hellllllp!" His cries were drowned in the roar of speeding traffic. The drivers ignored what was happening on the sidewalk.

Now Millman was forced down onto his chest, the concrete warm against his cheek. He was afraid, yet the event seemed interesting. He was being mugged! He had only a few dollars in his pocket. Yolande had warned him against being caught short of cash. The guy might kill him out of frustration.

"Don't fight me, I'll break your arm." Millman had not realized he was resisting. He went limp.

In *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers*, Marvin Lachman says, "Once, almost all Bankier stories were set in Canada . . . where Bankier was born and grew up. . . . With Bankier moving, first to London and then to L.A., those cities have become frequent settings for his stories. He is especially good, though devastatingly critical, of Los Angeles"—as in this latest tale. ¶

©1997 by William Bankier

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A motorcycle approached, slowed, stopped. It remained a few yards ahead, idling. Millman could see the rider, anonymous in a white helmet with a grey plastic visor. The rider turned the bike onto the sidewalk where he engaged the kickstand and got off.

The man on top of Millman yelled, "Don't mess with me!"

The motorcyclist unlatched a briefcase strapped above the back wheel. He reached in with a deliberate motion and took out an automatic pistol. The drifter rolled off his victim and lay on the ground with his knees and hands raised. Millman was reminded of a dog wanting its belly scratched. "Okay," the youth said. "Okay!"

The man in the helmet stood over him. He extended the gun at the end of a straight arm. It was like a TV interviewer getting an opinion from a man in the street. The gun went off, the drifter kicked as his head jerked sideways. He lay still. The motorcyclist fired a second bullet into the man's head.

Traffic raced past on Fountain Avenue. Some drivers turned to glance at the action, others kept their eyes on the road ahead. All drove on without reducing speed.

The motorcyclist replaced the gun in the briefcase and snapped it shut. Then he climbed back onto the saddle, bumped across the curb, kicked the starter, twisted the accelerator, and raced away in the direction of La Brea.

Millman remained on hands and knees, trembling.

He called the police from his apartment a block away on Spaulding. Yolande was at the gallery in Beverly Hills. He thought of telephoning her first, then decided it would be better if everything got sorted out before he had to deal with her emotion.

The cops were calm. He met two of them back at the scene of the crime. Their black-and-white was pulling up by the body as he turned the corner. The sergeant in charge was a black woman with chestnut hair in tight curls. Her cap remained on the seat of the car. She was accompanied by a stocky constable with a blond crewcut and suspicious eyes.

As they examined the dead man, Zeke explained what had happened. They wanted a description of the killer. "I never saw his face. He had on one of those helmets that covers the entire head. The visor was grey plastic."

"Boots?"

"Yeah, boots. No, maybe shoes."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How big was he?"

"I was on the ground looking up. I can't be certain."

"What about the bike? Was it a Harley? a Yamaha?"

"I don't know much about motorcycles."

"Did you see the license number?"

"I saw it but I don't recall it."

When the interview ended, Millman felt the police had more respect for the corpse than they had for him. He said this to Yolande after she arrived home at seven and he fitted her up with her dry sherry and then broke the news.

"I'm all right," he said, trying to put out her fire before it got started. "See? I'm not hurt." He described the entire event.

"We have to get out of this neighborhood." Yolande was short, square-jawed, dark-haired. At forty-six, she looked fifteen years younger.

"There is no safe place," Millman reminded her. "Down the street from your gallery on Rodeo Drive? They shot a man last month, for his Rolex."

Millman got busy with supper. He made salmon patties and salad. Yolande said, "You can't walk around anymore. Your grey head is a signal."

"I was born here."-But the area where he'd grown up was now known as Koreatown; he never went there. "I've been walking around Los Angeles for sixty-five years and nothing happened to me until this afternoon. I taught school in what became a tough neighborhood. I had gang-bangers in my class, they all respected me."

"I married you, I'm supposed to take care of you. You could have been the one dead on the street. Then what happens to me?"

"Some millionaire will walk into the gallery to buy a Hockney. You'll be remarried within two years."

She was not amused. "That shows me what you think of our relationship."

"It was meant to be a compliment." He left the table to change the audio cassette, replacing Vivaldi with Mancini.

She said, "We should call Jeffrey." Their son was working for a newspaper in Montreal. Using the French he had learned at his mother's knee, he had become bilingual within a year. He had gone on to adopt her maiden name as his byline. He was now Jeffrey Carpentier.

In letters, he praised the northern city. He could see why his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

grandparents had moved to Los Angeles. They wanted to escape winter and find lucrative work in the aircraft factories. But why did his mother and father stay in what was becoming a hellhole?

Zeke confronted his son about the political situation in Quebec. "Washington is Canada's ally. We would never accept a separated Quebec. You guys will become Cuba North."

Now he said to Yolande, "There's no reason to upset the boy. I'm not hurt."

The crew from Channel 7 showed up mid evening. Millman was encouraged to stand outside his front door beside a dwarf palm. Portable lights blazed, the video camera stared, and a pert girl with a clipboard asked questions. She was intrigued by the mysterious stranger on his motorcycle. "Zeke Millman is alive and well this evening," she concluded, "safely at home with his loving wife. And he owes his life to the arrival of a Deadly Samaritan."

They stayed up to watch the eleven o'clock news. Zeke slapped his knee when his image appeared. Yolande held him with both arms, her cheek pressed against his shoulder, her eyes frowning at the screen.

The television people had been busy. They not only had obtained the name and a photo of the deceased mugger, they had located his girlfriend and recorded a conversation with her.

"Holly Peterson knew Mickey Trull as well as anybody could know the troubled young man from a small Nevada town. It was a case of two lost souls. Holly grew up in Malibu. Three years ago, at age nineteen, she abandoned that bastion of privilege for the excitement of the street life in Hollywood. Here's what she told our reporter."

The girl's appearance on the screen surprised Millman. It was as if a pedigreed animal had been left outdoors, running loose and starving. She had rich-girl's fine blond hair, but it had not been washed in a while. Her face was weathered, skin the texture and color of a russet apple. Her eyes were cried out.

"Mickey never did anything like that before," the girl said. "He must have been desperate. They didn't have to kill him."

The camera panned to the reporter who said, "Mickey Trull went out this afternoon to get some money. He's dead now, and Holly Peterson must weep alone outside the liquor store at Santa Monica and Spaulding. As for the Deadly Samaritan, he may be watching this telecast somewhere in Los Angeles. If so, what is he thinking?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When the anchorwoman went on to the next story, Yolande said, "I'd kill him myself if he was still alive."

Millman's thoughts were elsewhere. Even after he turned in, he could not stop thinking about the pain in Holly Peterson's eyes.

She was easy to find. At one o'clock on the following afternoon, Millman walked down Spaulding to the corner of Santa Monica. Compared to his tree-lined neighborhood, this was another world. The retired schoolteacher found it stimulating. They were showing *Bimbo Bowlers* at the Pussycat Theater. Cars raced past pedestrians frozen between painted lines at a crosswalk. The kid who sold drugs slouched in baggy clothes against the stucco wall of the liquor store.

Holly came out of Beano's Coffee Shop carrying a plastic cup. She hunkered down with her back against the wall. Millman came over to her and said, "I'm sorry about Mickey."

"Who are you?"

He had encountered suspicion like this when he taught school. "My name is Millman."

She squinted up at him. "I saw you on the news."

"That guy stopping and killing your friend—it wasn't right."

"Can you lend me five dollars? I didn't eat yet today."

Millman led her into the coffee shop where she ordered the turkey dinner with mashed potatoes and gravy and a rounded scoop of stuffing. He drank coffee while the girl did most of the talking.

"Mickey came from a place outside Reno. His mother took off when he was four. His father couldn't cope. He'd knock the kid around when he was drunk. Then he'd sober up and cry all over him. When Mickey was six, the old man killed himself. After that, Mickey went to live with his grandmother. He made trouble at school. Dropped out. Drugs and alcohol. He came to L.A. a couple of years ago, when he was twenty-one."

"I taught school," Millman said. "I saw a lot of troubled kids."

Holly was slowing down, the plate nearly empty. "I haven't said I'm sorry." She looked at him, seeing him clearly for the first time. "You didn't do anything except get jumped on. You know something, Mr. . . . ?"

"Call me Zeke."

"Zeke, wow! If Mickey was alive, you know what he'd say? He'd

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

say if he'd known what a decent person you are, he would never have tried to rob you."

Millman went along with his companion on the cherry pie with ice cream. Memory can kick in at times and take your breath away. For a fleeting moment, he was dating in his teens, settled in at a diner in Balboa Beach. It was late at night after the concert, and they were intoxicated by the music of a young band led by somebody named Stan Kenton.

"Are you married, Zeke?"

"To a good woman named Yolande."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

"Feel safer?"

She looked mischievous. "I've had people out searching for me. My father sent a detective once. The guy wanted to keep me in a motel room for a few days."

"Father in Malibu?"

"How do you know that?"

"They said last night on TV."

"He writes screenplays. He does three a year. They never get produced, they're all 'in development.' It has something to do with tax write-offs. It's good money, but you should see his face."

"Is the street better?"

"It has nothing to do with better," Holly said. "My father has his way of having a miserable life. This is my way."

A busboy filled their coffee mugs. Millman asked, "Is your mother alive?"

"Sort of. She's alcoholic and anorexic. She mostly watches aerobics programs on TV." The girl's eyes suddenly filled with tears. "Mickey was neat. I understood where he was coming from."

"He was coming from behind me."

"He never really hurt you."

"That's true."

"He wouldn't."

"He didn't."

Millman went home and vacuumed the apartment. He did some thinking. What if the Trull murder had not been coincidental? What if the Samaritan was Mickey's enemy, taking advantage of the situation? Maybe the killing was an act of revenge.

Holly Peterson had said she was going to sit in Plummer Park.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Millman put away the Hoover and walked over to the green space with its tennis courts and crowded benches.

Not much English was spoken in the park. The benches were jammed with middle-aged people, recent arrivals from the former Soviet Union. They knew what real trouble was; America was just beginning to find out.

He found Holly sitting on the grass under a tree. Millman relaxed beside her. He was having a much nicer time since being mugged. "Tell me what you think," he said. "Mickey getting shot—I suppose it could be a fluke. The guy rides by at that moment. He has a gun, he sees an old person being attacked, he decides to take care of it."

"Flukey things happen."

"But let's say it was revenge. Some person who was Mickey's enemy was looking for an opportunity. He spots him on Fountain, swings a U-turn down the block. When he rides back, Mickey has me down. He's preoccupied. The guy comes over and shoots him."

"This is interesting."

"What a break for the killer. His motive is buried in what looks like a spontaneous shooting."

"Did you tell the police?"

"Not yet. We have to see if there's any person who fits what I just said."

Holly thought about it. "There's a guy named Sid Hecht. He goes back and forth to Santa Barbara where his parents live. They give him money to stay away. Mickey sold Sid a TV for fifty bucks. It only worked for a day."

"Would he kill Mickey over fifty dollars?"

"Of course. But there was something else. Sid came on to me. Mickey beat him up."

"More like it."

"Know how Sid gets around? On a big old motorcycle."

Millman was excited. "How can I get to see this man?"

"He's in town." The girl pushed herself erect. She seemed to vibrate against a background of leaves and sky. "Got money for the phone?"

He gave her a quarter and watched her drift across the lawn to a bank of telephones. She dropped the coin in the slot, talked for a couple of minutes, then walked back. "He's coming over."

"You didn't tell him what I think?"

"I'm not retarded."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Millman went to buy cold drinks. A bulky Russian lady in a print dress said something to him. He searched his mind for Russian words. All he could come up with was a fragment from the song, "Oh Chi-Chornya." He recited what he knew. "Kaag loob loo ya vaas. Kaag bah yoos ya vaas."

The woman studied his face. Then she spread her arms like a symphony conductor, bowed from the waist, and said, "Thank you!"

Sid Hecht showed up after three-thirty. It was clear this was not the man. Helmetless and ponytailed, he rode aboard a mauve machine that was decorated with shiny fittings and cruised like a yacht.

"Definitely not him," he told Holly as the newcomer swaggered across the lawn in cowboy boots.

"Don't blame me. I tried to help."

"I'm just wondering what to say, now he's here."

"You don't have to hang around. He's my friend."

Millman crept back to the apartment like one of his students expelled from class. It was silly for him to feel hurt by Holly's dismissive attitude. He was calm by the time he went inside and saw the red light flashing on the answering machine. He listened to the message. It was somebody from the TV station.

"Mr. Millman? The station has been getting calls. People want to do things for you. Central Dry Cleaning wants to take care of your clothes. Free dinner for two at the Lotus Restaurant. There are others. Of course they're all getting on the bandwagon for the publicity. We'd like to tape a presentation on camera."

Millman and Yolande got dressed up and drove to the studio that evening in her car. After the videotaping, they went to the Lotus to make use of their meal voucher. The staff recognized the famous mugging victim and made a fuss.

"You look the way I feel," Yolande said when, at last, they were alone.

"I'm weary. It sounds like it would be fun, but it's depressing."

She drank some wine. "Are you sure nothing else is bothering you?"

"Of course." He was thinking about Holly Peterson. Bad enough he was married to a woman nineteen years younger. But here he was mooning about a girl barely out of her teens. The retired

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

teacher had always been able to see himself quite clearly. This was pathetic. Searching for a subject, he said, "I wonder if the Samaritan is a cop."

"That makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense. Police forces produce vigilantes. It's frustrating to arrest bad guys and see them back on the streets in no time. So they kill criminals and have done with it."

"How could you ever prove such a thing?"

"I can't!"

"Keep it down!" Yolande was glancing at other tables.

"Before this happened to me," Millman whispered, "I would have said kill anybody who mugs me. But Mickey Trull is not just anybody."

"You look tired. Can we go?"

Outside the restaurant, Yolande said, "You need to get some rest."

"What I need is to discover who killed Mickey Trull."

"Forget it, Zeke. It's a mystery. You'll never find that out."

More merchants contacted the TV station with gifts to ease the victim's pain. A market sent along a voucher for one hundred dollars' worth of shopping. Fred & Ginger Studio offered dancing lessons. Zeke declined that one.

But the chance to have his and Yolande's income-tax returns prepared free was an offer he did not refuse.

The accountant said, "I got your number from the station. My name is Herman Carrow, and I'm a CPA." The voice was confident. "Maybe you've already done your taxes."

"No, I've been putting it off."

"If you'll let me take care of it, I can probably save you some money."

Carrow's office was in Venice. "I won't ask you to come all the way down here. Name a time that's convenient. Get your papers together and I'll drive over to your place."

Millman arranged an evening when Yolande would be at home. Carrow drove up in a pale green vintage Buick. The couple watched from their front window as he climbed out, inspecting the building through tinted glasses. The CPA was a tall man in golf shirt and shorts, hairy legs rooted in black sandals. He hauled a briefcase from the backseat and trudged up the stairs to the door of apartment three.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Carrow shook Millman's hand. He bowed graciously to Yolande. They got right to it, sitting at a round table in the dining alcove.

"Any other deductions?" The accountant kept sliding his glasses down his nose to peer at Millman. The discussion was brief; they were finished in twenty minutes. Carrow stashed the papers in his briefcase with a deliberate motion, then snapped the lock. As he lifted himself off the chair, Millman blinked.

Yolande was making coffee. She served it with slices of pound cake. Carrow said, "I'll bring the completed forms around in a couple of days for you to sign."

"Do you want us to come and get them at your office?"

"Stay out of that neighborhood. You could get mugged again."

"I don't like to take you out of your way."

"I drive past here all the time."

Millman walked Carrow to his car. "It's a small thing, but I believe I'm right," he said.

"About what?"

"It was the way you put the file in your briefcase and snapped the lock. Exactly the way the Samaritan did it when he put back his gun. And then you hoisted yourself off the chair, just like he got off his bike. You're him."

Carrow raised his eyebrows. "What an imagination!"

"You say you come by this way all the time. My guess is it's not always in the car. Sometimes you're on a motorcycle."

"Fascinating."

"Commuting all the way back and forth to Venice, the bike would be faster and more convenient. Easier to park."

"And more fun. Passing between lanes of traffic—it's freedom."

"Why did you come here? Why take the chance of being identified?"

"If there has to be a reason, it's so I could get to know you better. I was curious. But I'm not admitting anything." He stowed his briefcase, got into the car, switched on the engine. Through the open window, he said, "Some people hold this belief: If you save a man's life, you're responsible for him forever."

"Hey!" Millman called as the elegant sedan pulled away. "I've got other things to ask you!"

Inside, he reported to Yolande. It was more than a suspicion now, it was a certainty. "Carrow is the Samaritan," he concluded. "He as good as admitted it."

"What will you do?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He saved my life. I suppose I should be kissing the hem of his garment." Millman had never experienced such ambivalence. "But Mickey Trull did not deserve to die. Maybe I'll report him to the police."

"They'll prosecute him, if they can prove it."

"Right is right," Millman said.

He decided to ask the opinion of Holly Peterson. Two of them could decide better than one. It was important. Carrow would surely go to prison if they reported him to the police.

But first, the girl had to meet Carrow. Becoming acquainted could make a difference. Mickey Trull would forever be more than just a mugger because Holly had laid out his life story. Same went for the Deadly Samaritan. It would have been easy to label him a homicidal opportunist. But now, to Millman, he was a human being. The teacher wanted Holly to learn that fact.

Carrow telephoned two days later to announce the tax returns were completed. And what about Zeke's suspicions?

The teacher played it down. "Relax. If you're him, you saved my life."

Carrow said he would drop off the forms whenever Millman would be home. Zeke made the arrangement for the following evening. It was ideal because Yolande would be working late at the gallery in Beverly Hills. They were launching a new artist.

Next afternoon, Millman walked down to Santa Monica Boulevard in search of Holly Peterson. She was not around the liquor store. She was not in Plummer Park. After an hour, he was ready to give up.

Then he spotted her hurrying out of the Alpha Beta market. Two employees were on her heels. They backed her against a wall. As Millman approached, he heard one of them saying, "You put them in your pocket."

When Holly took out two packs of batteries and handed them over, Millman interceded. "She was buying them for me. I forgot to give her the money."

"She's done this before."

"Can't I pay and you let her go?" He produced a twenty-dollar bill.

"Will you promise to keep her out of the store?"

"Of course."

"We'll put back the merchandise, sir. You keep your money."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As they walked away, Millman said, "What did you want with flashlight batteries?"

"I could sell them."

"I can let you have money." He handed her the twenty.

She said, "It's starting to bug me, you being on my case all the time." But she tucked the bill into her shirt pocket.

"I've been looking for you. I'd like you to come up to the apartment."

"Forget it."

"Not now. Tonight. My wife is about your size. She's got a bunch of clothes you can have."

"I have clothes back home in Malibu."

"But you won't go there. Come after eight."

"You expect me to wear your wife's clothes?"

"You can sell them." He told her his address.

She was late. When Herman Carrow rolled up in the Buick at eight-fifteen, Holly had not appeared. The accountant flipped through the completed returns, which showed refunds of $700 from the IRS and $320 from the State. "Sign here and here," he concluded, "put them in the mail, and wait for your checks."

"I'm impressed."

"Better than getting mugged on Fountain Avenue." Carrow kept a straight face.

"Better than two shots in the head at close range."

"I still don't admit it was me."

"How come you're riding around with a loaded gun?"

"Have you been down around Venice lately? Have you seen the gang-bangers? You watch the television news. You must be aware of the drive-by shootings, the car-jackings."

"Aren't you adding to the violence?"

The CPA closed his briefcase. He moved to a settee, sat down, and placed the case between his feet. "Last winter, I left my office and was walking to where I keep my bike. Two kids cornered me. They were teenagers. One of them was carrying a sawed-off shotgun. He put the muzzle under my chin. They took my watch and my wallet. I went back to the office to report the robbery. It took me an hour at my desk before my hands stopped shaking so I could drive home."

"I'm not saying we don't have crime."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm lucky to be alive. If I'd ticked that kid off one little bit, he would have sprayed my brains across that brick wall."

"I'm glad you intervened. Everybody else was passing by on the other side. But Trull was not armed. You could have ordered him off me and sent him on his way."

"To rob somebody else."

"To get on with his life."

The doorbell rang. Millman opened it and let in Holly Peterson. She looked different. Her face was scrubbed and her hair was brushed, parted in the middle, and braided in two neat pigtails that stuck out above her ears.

Millman performed the introductions, first names only. Then he went into the kitchen and got three beers which he poured into pilsner glasses. Carrow's voice rumbled in the other room. Holly laughed. He brought in the glasses on a tray. She said, "I like this tavern."

Millman said, "Holly's from Malibu. Her father writes screenplays. She's a freelance."

"When she starts writing screenplays," Carrow said, "I'll do her taxes."

As they drank the beer, a nice feeling developed between the three of them. It was exactly what the former schoolteacher had hoped would happen. Carrow was going to be shown the error of his ways. When the time seemed right, Millman announced, "By the way, Holly is Mickey Trull's girlfriend. And although Herman is not ready to admit it, he is the man the media calls the Deadly Samaritan."

Carrow's face went red. "You set this up."

"He killed Mickey?"

"What are you doing, Zeke? What's the point?"

Millman gathered the empty glasses on the tray. He headed back to the kitchen. "Let's have a refill. Let's talk."

Carrow was on his heels. "You had no right to do this. What are you, some kind of evangelist?"

"I want you to understand what you did. The implications. This girl loved that guy. She was walking a narrow line, and all of a sudden her friend is dead."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Only consider it. I don't intend to report you to the police. At first I thought I would. But all I want now is for you to leave your gun at home. Stop going around looking for somebody to kill. Just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

because those kids robbed you." Millman, deciding against more beer, headed back to the living room. "Revenge will eat you alive."

"There's an angry girl in there!"

"Talk to her. She's human."

Holly had moved to the settee where she was sitting bolt upright with her arms folded across her chest. Carrow said, "I'm out of here." As he bent to pick up his briefcase, it looked wrong. He opened it and peered down into the aperture.

"Is this what you're looking for?" The girl lifted an automatic pistol from behind a cushion and aimed it at Carrow. He took a step backwards.

Millman said, "Don't do that, Holly."

She fired, hitting Carrow in the chest. He fell across a chair. She went to him and shot him once more in the head.

Millman had his hands over his ears. He yelled, "You weren't supposed to kill him!"

"You are such an absentee. Boy, do you ever belong in front of a high-school class."

He was looking at the telephone.

"You know what I have to do, don't you," she told him. "I have to kill you, too. Fast, before somebody reports gunfire. That way, I'll have a chance."

"My wife knows you're here," he said. "She'll be along any minute."

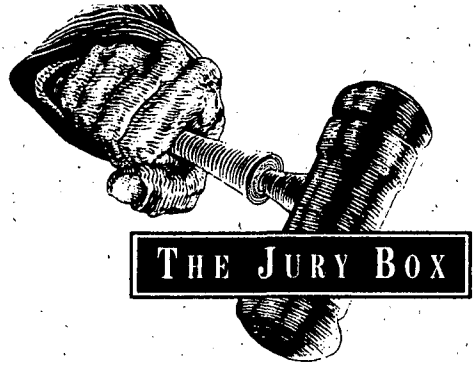
"You're lying. You set this up without telling anybody. Your own little project to make it a better world." As she raised the gun and took aim, she said, "Well, it isn't."

Holly Peterson died late that night in Malibu. She was killed accidentally by her mother. The neurotic woman, alone in the house while her husband was out playing cards, crept down a dark stairway to investigate noises in the room where the undeclared cash was kept between the pages of many books. Mrs. Peterson shot her daughter with one of the bedroom guns.

This was an easy case for the police to close. They never did figure out who came in and murdered the retired schoolteacher and his tax accountant in West Hollywood while they were sitting around drinking beer. The third empty glass was a clue. It suggested the killer was a friend. But the wife had an alibi, and everybody else checked out.

So the trail went cold very quickly and, in the end, that file was tossed on a shelf along with all the others. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



by Jon L. Breen

Crime and mystery fiction have an almost infinite number of sub-categories—some (espionage, underworld, private eye, formal detection, modern gothic) go in and out of fashion but are always around in some form. Others flourish for a time and disappear almost entirely. Take, for example, male romantic suspense. In the forties and fifties, in slick and pulp magazines, in hard and paper covers, were stories as sentimentally romantic as any Harlequin Intrigue but written from a masculine perspective. Octavus Roy Cohen practiced the form with titles like *A Bullet for My Love, Love Can Be Dangerous, Love Has No Alibi,* and *Romance in the First Degree.* Another practitioner, as seen in the first book publication of a 1944 novel from the pulp *Mammoth Detective,* was the popular fiction chameleon Howard Browne, writing for the first time as John Evans, the byline of the first three of Browne's very Chandleresque Paul Pine novels.

*** Howard Browne: *Murder Wears a Halo,* Gryphon Publications, P.O. Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209; $20 trade paperback, $40 signed limited. Chicago pulp writer Don Hearn falls in love with beautiful, enigmatic writing buff Loa Santley, their involvement leading to a pair of murder trials and the single recorded case of Browne's Perry Mason homage Endicott (End) Overend. (The same publisher's Gryphon Double Novel series offers a back-to-back reprinting of two enjoyable Browne novelettes that combine mystery and science fiction: *Twelve Times Zero/Carbon-Copy Killer*[$10], from 1952 and 1943 respectively.)

**** Ed Gorman: *Black River Falls,* Leisure, $4.99. A sharply

©1997 by Jon L. Breen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

observed middle-American background, a painfully recognizable view of adolescent rites of passage, a dark but not completely pessimistic slant on family relationships, a Woolrichian incursion of crime and terror into recognizable everyday life, a rapidly paced narrative full of unexpected but fully believable twists and turns—these are some of the features of Gorman country, to which this novel's visit is one of the best.

**** Jonathan Kellerman: *The Web,* Bantam, $24.95. In his eleventh appearance, psychologist Alex Delaware assists Detective Milo Sturgis in the complicated case of Dr. Hope Devane, a murdered professor and bestselling pop-psych author. Kellerman's L.A. background and large cast of characters are, as usual, well-drawn, including that signature feature of the best whodunits: an interesting murderer.

**** William L. DeAndrea: *Fatal Elixir,* Walker, $22.95. The author, who died last year at the tragically young age of 44, is at his best in what may prove to be his last novel: the second western mystery about paralyzed lawman-turned-newspaperman Lobo Blacke and his dime-novel biographer Quinn Booker. The mystery is both surprisingly resolved and clued with scrupulous fairness, the telling bright and humorous. The title refers to the tainted product sold by a traveling medicine show.

*** H.R.F. Keating: *Asking Questions,* St. Martin's, $20.95. Inspector Ghote returns in a typically thoughtful and deceptive narrative centered on scientific ethics. (Is the Indian dialect getting quirkier itself in recent volume-smolumes, or is it my imagination only?)

*** H.R.F. Keating: *In Kensington Gardens Once . . .*, Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505-9315; $12 trade paperback, $35 signed limited. These ten short stories, three of them previously unpublished, all are set in Kensington Gardens. Keating is nearly as good a miniaturist as he is a novelist, and Gwen Mandley's drawings add to the appeal.

*** Aaron Elkins: *Twenty Blue Devils,* Mysterious, $27.95. The ninth novel about Skeleton Detective Gideon Oliver is well up to snuff, with an interesting background of Tahiti and coffee growing and a larger than usual role for FBI sidekick John Lau.

Two original anthologies are directed at the cozy fan. *Murder, They Wrote* (Boulevard, $6.99), edited by Martin H. Greenberg and Elizabeth Foxwell, is ostensibly fronted by TV's Jessica Fletcher, who appears in one of the stories, collaborating with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Charlaine Harris's librarian-detective Aurora Teagarden in "Deeply Dead," which has an interesting murderer and motive but (in common with too many of today's traditional whodunits) lacks clues and real detection. The same pluses and minuses apply to Nancy Pickard's "The Potluck Supper Murders," featuring the late Virginia Rich's Eugenia Potter. Jean Hager's locked-room puzzle "A Deadly Attraction" is one of the few real puzzle stories in the book. Some stories offer variations on well-known works—the first name of the female lead in Jane Dentinger's theatre tale "The Last of Laura Dane" is surely no coincidence, and Kate Kingsbury's "A Nice Cup of Tea" may remind you of *The Whales of August*. Among the better stories are straight crime tales by Janet Laurence and Sally Gunning.

Though uncredited on the book, the same team of editors produced *Malice Domestic 6* (Pocket, $5.99), introduced by Anne Perry. Though my own contribution (and a splendid job it is!)may bias me, I found this a somewhat stronger collection, with two satirical gems: Peter Lovesey and Edward Marston's parodic tribute to definitively awful mystery writer James Corbett and his devoted fan William F. Deeck; and Simon Brett's tale of a bestselling author of cat mysteries determined to kill off her fictional feline's real-life model. Other highlights: a very clever nursing-home poisoning mystery about Catherine Aird's C. D. Sloan; Lindsey Davis's Greek historical on the murder of Pythagoras; a family holiday murder by Betty Nathan; and a tale for fans of the bibliomystery by Peter Robinson.

Among the reprints are two 1945 classics from Carroll & Graf: Joel Townsley Rogers's offbeat *The Red Right Hand* ($4.95),with an informative new introduction by Edward D. Hoch, and one of the best locked room novels by John Dickson Carr (writing as Carter Dickson), *The Curse of the Bronze Lamp* ($4.95).

Fans of Mike W. Barr's classic detection comic book *The Maze Agency* will be glad to know it's found a new home: Caliber Comics. Barr advises the black-and-white book "will be available through comic specialty shops only, but interested parties can contact Caliber directly at 888/22-COMIC."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Jason Eckhardt

WEDDING BLUES

by Marianne Strong

Every wedding makes someone unhappy.

Stan Odysek, sheriff of Bloomsville, figured this one would make plenty of people unhappy. The bride was Polish; the groom, Irish. A prescription for trouble in Bloomsville, PA.

Still, Stan entered Pulaski Hall hoping for a good time. He needed one. He'd been keeping watch for the FBI on two rackets men who had come up from Harrisburg to Bloomsville four days ago, possibly, the authorities thought, to launder some money, possibly after someone who owed them drug money. The rackets men had visited a jewelry store, nosed around a few neighborhoods, spent half an hour in a bar with Stan's own black-sheep cousin Walter, and left. They'd done nothing illegal as far as Stan could tell.

He pulled open the double glass doors of Pulaski Hall. Plenty of people had made it before him up to the hall from St. Casimir's Church. They'd taken their places: the McGuires seated at the

© 1997 by Marianne Strong

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tables on the left side of the hall and the Korskis on the right. The scene reminded Stan of the basketball games in his high school days. St. Casimir kids lined up on the right bleachers yelling, "Polish, Polish," and the St. Patrick kids lined up on the left yelling, "Irish, Irish." Not one had any idea why they were supposed to hate each other. The days of the Irish foremen in the mines wielding what little power they had over the newly arrived Polish immigrants and the days of the Irish bishops in the Catholic churches blocking the appointment of Polish clergy had passed two generations ago. But the tensions remained. Today, they swirled around the head of the bride: Carolyn Korski, now Mrs. William McGuire.

Marianne Strong now lives in Maryland but she draws the inspiration for her stories from her hometown of Wilkes-Barre, PA. She often visits there, researching its coal-mining past and roaming through its many ethnic neighborhoods. Her latest story focuses on one such ethnic community and a wedding that nearly goes off without a hitch. ¶

Stan smiled with avuncular pride at Carolyn, seated in the middle of the main table behind a spread of gardenias, looking gorgeous with her delicate blond beauty. She also looked very nervous. Her fingers tugged at a blue brooch pinned to the bodice of her white gown. She had reason to be nervous. Her new mother-in-law looked as if her son were being shipped out to some remote military hotspot where the army's acceptable loss rate was about seventy-five percent.

Stan walked toward table sixteen, his assigned place, and winced when Cousin Walter crossed his path. If anyone would confirm for Carolyn's mother-in-law that her son had married into a horde of Eastern European barbarians, it would be Cousin Walter. Walter had had sticky fingers since the second grade, when he'd stolen five boxes of Necco Wafers from Uncle Larry's penny-candy store. Later, continuing in his way, he'd indulged in some crude embezzlement and lost his job as school transportation director. Now, Walter was headed straight for the bridal table.

Stan's right hand strayed to where his holster normally rested against his hip when he was on duty. "Hello, Walter," he said. "Surprised to see you. Family affairs don't usually hold much interest for you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Well, this one does," Walter said.

"Hope you didn't bring along any of your Harrisburg buddies?" Stan hadn't bothered questioning Walter about the rackets men. Stan would be lucky to get the time of day from Cousin Walter.

The left side of Walter's mouth twitched. He tugged on the too-short sleeves of his tux, but they sprang back up over his skinny wrists. "Now look, Sheriff, I was on my way to remind the groom I'd bring his car up here for him tonight. Made the arrangements with him and Carolyn a few days ago." Walter's self-importance had moved into high gear. "You're not going to spoil this nice affair by rattling on about parking violations and crap games, are you? You're not wearing your sheriff's badge, are you?" Walter turned over Stan's lapels.

Stan balled his fists. One good shot, a couple of teeth on the floor, a bloody lip. He stayed cool. "Nope. Promised Carolyn's mother I'd ignore the lowlife she had to invite. She thinks anybody can be useful at a wedding."

Walter adjusted his bow tie and rubbed his golfball nose, a habit that he'd had from the first grade and indulged in whenever he was nervous or angry. "I might be a little more useful than you think. I have my connections."

"Yeah," Stan said. Even as a teenager, Walter had had connections. He'd always waved around tickets to the harness-racing track. Half of Walter's present connections were with State Senator Dan McGuire. Stan suspected Dan McGuire of having a hand in every racket game in the state of Pennsylvania, but neither he nor any other authority had been able to get anywhere near to a real piece of evidence. Dan covered his tracks well, and Walter's too. For the life of him, Stan couldn't see why the family should be so sensitive about Walter when the McGuires had Dan. But then, Dan was a crook with status. Walter was just a crook.

Stan looked round. "McGuire here?" he asked.

"Dan's mighty sorry he couldn't make it up from Harrisburg for the wedding," Walter said.

"Missing his nephew's wedding, is he? Even you couldn't persuade him to come? Haven't had a falling-out with Dan, have you?"

Walter stiffened. "You just try to enjoy yourself, Sheriff," he said. "And stick to what you know best. If I see anyone double-parked outside, I'll let you know so you can swing right into action and earn your money." He turned and headed for the bridal table.

Uncle Larry hobbled over to Stan. "If anyone's missing five of anything," he said, staring at Walter's back, "arrest him." Uncle

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Larry was long on memory and short on forgiveness. "Know what the creep tried to do a couple of days ago?"

"At the candy store?" Uncle Larry, at age seventy-five, still ran the store, though it didn't turn the profit it used to.

"Naw. He hasn't been in for thirty years. Tried to borrow some money from Matilda."

"She didn't give any to him, did she?" Stan knew Larry's wife had a soft heart, and Walter knew it, too.

"Gave him fifty. Could have been worse. He wanted three thousand. Matilda said he sounded pretty desperate. Must be behind on his car payments." Uncle Larry chuckled. "Might have to sell that fancy new car he's been sportin' around in. Can't figure where he got the money to buy it in the first place."

Stan balled his fists again. He disapproved of preying on elderly relatives. But he wouldn't do anything about it today. He just wanted to enjoy himself, even if he couldn't expect the kind of wedding his sister had had twenty-five years ago, before the Polish-Americans had gone sophisticated with roast beef for the wedding dinners instead of kielbasa, and wine and mixed drinks instead of beer. But there would be a live band, not a deejay spinning rock records, and the band would play a few polkas. He and Aunt Matilda would spin around the hall until they were dizzy. He sat down at table sixteen to await dinner.

The roast beef turned out lean and rare, but lacked the pungent chewiness of the kielbasa Carolyn's mother had insisted the caterers serve, much to Stan's delight. Stan noticed that most of the McGuire plates had a curl of kielbasa left rather forlornly on the side, but then, he and his cousins had left the green mashed potatoes to dry into cakey masses.

Little Mike Korski was still making railroad tracks in his potatoes with his fork. "Mom," he said, "they look like . . ."

His mother punched his shoulder.

"What?" he squealed, his eyes wide with the righteous protest of the unjustly punished.

"Behave yourself," his mother said.

"I am," Mike mumbled He looked to Uncle Stan for manly compassion against domineering women. "I carried that dumb pillow with the stupid pink bows. And I didn't drop it again either."

"Again?" Stan asked.

"Yeah. I dropped it at practice yesterday. Aunt Carolyn bawled all over the place, and it wasn't even dirty."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Probably just her nerves, Mike, old boy. Brides get like that. You have to understand."

"I don't." Stan's mother, who was seated to Stan's other side, leaned over to whisper in his ear. "She cried her eyes out. Took me twenty minutes to calm her. And did you notice her eyes at the ceremony this morning?"

"Can't say I did," Stan said.

"Red. She'd been crying again."

"So? Brides are supposed to cry, right?"

"Not that much."

"You saying maybe she's pregnant and had to get married?"

Stan's mother punched his shoulder.

Mike looked up at Stan. "What'd you say, Uncle Stan?"

Stan's mother leaned across her son toward Mike. "He didn't say anything worth repeating. Now, eat your potatoes."

Mike hung his tongue out. Stan poked him and grinned. "I'm going to the bar. Can you use a Coke, old boy?"

"Yeah. Can I come with you, Uncle Stan?"

Stan nodded. They made their way past a few Korski tables, Mike skipping away from aunts and uncles who wanted to see how tall he'd grown. He went a little pale when he tripped over the outstretched foot of a McGuire man, but cheered up when the man solicited pity for their both having to wear bow ties.

When Mike decided his bladder couldn't hold a Coke without some emptying out of the milk he'd been forced to drink, Stan steered toward the restrooms. They were about to cross in front of the door of the ladies' room when it popped open and Carolyn came out. She started when she saw Mike and Stan.

"Hi, Aunt Carolyn. I didn't drop it."

Carolyn stared at him.

"I didn't. I didn't drop the pillow."

"Oh, the pillow. No, Mikey. You did just fine."

Stan tousled Mike's hair. "I'm getting him his reward. A Coke."

"Oh, yes," Carolyn said. Her fingers closed tightly over the blue pin she wore at the V in the bodice of her gown.

"You holding up okay, Carolyn?" Stan asked.

"Just fine, thanks, Uncle Stan."

"Looks like the band's about ready. You're probably needed."

Carolyn looked over toward her groom. "Oh yes. Yes, I am." She walked away.

Stan watched her until Mike pulled him toward the men's room.

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two hours later, Mike, having gone beyond his quota of four Cokes, was nursing another glass of milk. Stan left him in the care of the sympathetic bow-tied McGuire and trotted out Aunt Matilda for their fifth polka. By that time, several McGuires had decided that the jig and the polka called for basically the same series of hops, and the floor rocked. The wedding was proceeding very nicely indeed. No McGuire had asked who the hell Pulaski was, and no Korski had mentioned the green potatoes. Only Carolyn still looked a little nervous, but then the bridal dance, the capping ceremony, was coming up. Carolyn would likely relax after it was over.

Stan took Aunt Matilda back to her seat and fiddled in his pocket, hoping he hadn't forgotten the fifty-dollar bill, rather a generous donation, but then Carolyn was his favorite niece. The bill was there.

Walter was circling round, loudly urging people to clear the dance area. Carolyn walked to the center of the floor, and her maid of honor, Barbara, went to stand beside her.

From behind Stan, the voice of Carolyn's mother-in-law, seated with several other McGuires, cut the air in a high pitch. "What's going to happen now?"

Stan clenched the fifty-dollar bill. He didn't think Mrs. McGuire was going to like this.

The maid of honor reached up and took off Carolyn's veil.

Mrs. McGuire gasped.

Walter dragged out a chair and Barbara sat down in it, spreading the veil on her lap. Mrs. Korski walked over to her daughter. When she stepped back, Carolyn's blond head was swathed in a white scarf. A babushka. The Korski women clapped, and the men began to line up where Walter directed them.

"What are they doing now?" Mrs. McGuire whined. "Oh, where's William?"

Stan decided he'd better prepare Mrs. McGuire for what was to come. He pulled up a chair near her. She looked at him as if he were carrying bubonic plague.

"This is an old Polish custom, Mrs. McGuire. The babush—er, the scarf, symbolizes Carolyn's status. She's a married woman now. But she'll have one last dance with all the men present. Each one will dance with her in turn. To help her get started with her new home, they'll pay for the privilege of the dance. They'll drop the money into the bridal veil the maid of honor is holding."

Mrs. McGuire stared.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You see, it's an old custom."

Mrs. McGuire stared.

"Eh, to help out the bride and groom."

"William is a dentist. He does not need help."

"Yes, well, I'm sure he doesn't, Mrs. McGuire. But everyone will want to help anyway. It's an old custom."

"Payment to dance with the girl?"

"No, you see . . . well, okay, yes." Stan lost patience. He stood up. "A last chance before the damned lucky groom claims the prize."

Mrs. McGuire gasped.

Stan got in line, wondering if he could whirl Carolyn up the floor enough to step on Mrs. McGuire's foot. No wonder the poor girl was so nervous.

His dance with Carolyn over, Stan sat, Mike leaning sleepily against his shoulder, and watched things begin to wind down. Mrs. McGuire had survived the disgrace of the bridal dance, and Carolyn had disappeared to change into street clothes before her final goodbye. Stan was beginning to slump sleepily when his mother poked his shoulder. "Take it easy, Mom," Stan complained, then sat up when he saw the look on his mother's face. "What's wrong?"

"She's taken it, Stan, and you have to do something about this. But you're not to make a fuss, do you hear? No one's to know."

"Including me?" Stan said, hopeful.

"This is nothing to joke about, Stan. I don't know what's happening, but I knew something was wrong. Carolyn has been so upset."

"Someone's taken the groom away? His mother?"

"Stan."

Mike jumped.

"Your mother wants you, Mike," Stan's mother said. Mike threw a sympathetic look at Stan and scooted away.

Stan's mother took Mike's seat. "Now here's what happened. Barbara, she's the maid of honor, collected the bridal-dance money. She was supposed to take it upstairs and put it with Carolyn's clothes. But she didn't. I saw her put it into her purse. Stuff it in. All of it, and there must be quite a bit. I saw her do it because I'd gone to the kitchen to get your Aunt Matilda a glass of water. She's still out of breath. Barbara went out the back way, past the kitchen, stuffing the money into her purse. She got into her car and she's gone." Mrs. Odysek leaned back, folding her hands in her lap. "Well?"

"Christ," Stan said. "She's Carolyn's best friend. She and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Carolyn must have made some arrangement."

"Exactly," Stan's mother said.

Stan sat up straighter. "What the hell are you saying, Mom?"

"Swearing will not help. I'm saying that Carolyn is in trouble."

"You mean, she's arranging an abortion?"

Mrs. Odysek rolled her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. Why would she need an abortion now?"

"Then what?" Stan said.

"Keep your voice down. I don't know what. That's what you have to find out."

"Okay," Stan said, "I'll ask her."

"You can't just go up and ask."

"Why not?"

"Because it's her wedding day. And because she's gone upstairs where she'll change. She and William plan to leave at eight-thirty."

Stan looked at his watch. It was seven twenty-five. "What time did you see Barbara leave with the money?"

"I don't know exactly. About fifteen minutes ago. I had to get the water for Matilda, and I had to go to the bathroom. Then I looked around to see if Barbara had come back in. She hadn't. What does the time matter?"

"Maybe Barbara is supposed to meet Carolyn and William somewhere with the money."

"I doubt that."

"Right, well, maybe she's putting it into the bank for them."

"But they could do that themselves."

Stan grinned. "Maybe they're in too much of a hurry."

Stan's mother stood, impressing all five feet of her will on her son. "Barbara was nervous, as Carolyn has been for two days. Now Barbara has left with the money. You are the sheriff. It is your job to do something."

Stan stood, his head rising a foot and a half over his mother's. "Okay, I'll go arrest her. Is she armed?"

Stan's mother gestured to a young man heading toward the bar. "That's Edward O'Neill. He's Barbara's boyfriend. You could talk to him."

"Right." Stan strolled off toward Edward, knowing that his mother would not only watch, but would probably time the conversation. She guarded the family's welfare as closely as the Janissaries had the sultan.

Stan leaned against the bar, ordered a Coke, and nodded to Edward, feeling like an ass and wondering if his mother would accept

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his resignation as sheriff. "Your, uh, partner around?" he asked.

Edward blinked. "You mean Barbara?"

"Uh, yeah. Carolyn's looking for her."

Edward looked vaguely around the hall at the remaining guests. "Yeah, she must be here somewhere. I thought maybe she'd gone upstairs with Carolyn."

"She hasn't left, has she?"

Edward blinked again. "Hell, no. Why would she leave?"

"No reason. No reason," Stan reassured Edward. He felt more like an ass. "She's probably upstairs, like you said." But of course, she wasn't. Stan began to feel a little anxious. Carrying his Coke with him, he circled round the hall, casually inquiring after Barbara of various relatives. He ferreted out only one piece of information.

Aunt Matilda, seated now with Stan's mother, informed him that Barbara had had a quick conversation with Walter at about six.

Stan ignored his mother's loud throat noises, but he gave in when she tugged heavily on his shirt sleeve. Lips and eyes in straight lines, she nodded an "I told you so" at him. Then her eyebrows rose enough to lift her grey curls an inch higher. Stan turned around to see what had startled her.

Barbara was in the hall and hurrying toward the stairs.

Stan looked at his watch. It was seven forty-five. She'd been gone about half an hour. But on what mission that required what was probably, at a rough estimate, about two thousand dollars of bridal-dance money at an average of thirty dollars from about sixty men? And what the hell did Walter have to do with it, if anything?

Stan looked around for Walter and spotted him at the bar. He was consulting his watch. He said something to the bartender, then turned, waved furiously at the groom across the hall, and headed out the front doors of Pulaski Hall.

Escaping from another tug at his sleeve, Stan headed toward the bar. "My cousin Walter," he said to the bartender. "I need to talk with him. The guy with the golfball nose and the too-small tux. Did he say where he was headed?"

The bartender nodded. "Matter of fact, he did. Several times and loudly. Said he had the most important job here."

"What was that?"

"Volunteered to drive back to the church to get the groom's car and bring it here. I gather the groom left it there so his friends couldn't get at it and soap it up. Your, uh, cousin seemed to think it was quite a joke: getting the car to, uh, allow the groom to get the bride to a motel."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yeah," Stan said, "that's Cousin Walter."

But why, Stan thought, draining his Coke, had Walter volunteered? Damn, the wedding was so close to coming off without a hitch. He watched the guests, some still dancing, most talking, a few McGuires now sitting with some Korskis. Everything looked normal. He spotted the groom and watched him come down the stairs and go over to his mother. They both looked normal, too, except that Mrs. McGuire grabbed onto her son's arms as if he were headed for a death squad. Stan made up his mind.

He headed toward the stairs and the upper room where apparently Barbara and Carolyn were still ensconced. Before he got to the stairs, Barbara emerged from the door at the top, bounced down, and joined her boyfriend, smiling.

Stan climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. It flew open and Carolyn leapt out, bright and eager in a pink suit, then pulled back. "Oh, Uncle Stan," she said.

"Yeah, sorry. William's still with his mother."

"Oh, is he? How does she look? I mean, is she crying or anything?" Carolyn looked nervous again.

"She looks tragic, but she'll be fine."

"Tragic?" Carolyn took a step back. "Oh my God."

Stan pushed her gently into the room and closed the door. "Carolyn, tell me what the problem is. Maybe I can help."

"Oh God, if she knows, nothing can help."

"Knows what?"

"Oh, Uncle Stan. It's been awful."

"What? What?" Stan resisted the temptation to shake Carolyn.

"Mrs. McGuire's sapphire. In the brooch I was wearing on my dress. You know, something blue. William insisted I wear it. I didn't want to. I was brushing it the day before yesterday with jewelry cleaner, over the sink. It just popped out. And one of the side diamonds. The diamond went down the drain. I caught the sapphire. Oh God. She'll hate me more than ever if she finds out."

"How can she not find out?"

"I got the sapphire reset. John Casey did it for me. He's the jeweler. He put the sapphire back in, and he put in a false diamond until I could get him some money for a real one."

Stan nodded. "And Barbara paid him with the bridal money."

"Oh my God, how did you know? Who else knows?"

"Never mind, Carolyn." Stan took his niece into his arms and patted her back. "I know and my mother knows. That's all." Casey was the jeweler visited by the rackets men, but Stan

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thought it best not to let Carolyn in on that.

"I didn't know what to do. I was desperate. I just wanted to get the hateful thing fixed by this evening. Barbara took the brooch down to the jeweler's for the real diamond after the bridal dance. She just got it back to me, and I sent William down to Mrs. McGuire with it."

"Does your husband know about this?"

"Oh good God, no. I'll tell him, of course, but after the honeymoon. But you said Mrs. McGuire knew." Carolyn sobbed again.

"No, I didn't say that. She looked tragic because her son is going off with another woman." Stan gave Carolyn his handkerchief. "You'd better dry up. I think your husband's coming."

Carolyn dabbed her eyes, and when William entered, explained that she and dear old Uncle Stan just couldn't help crying.

Stan sniffled as best he could. "My favorite niece, you know." He let it go at that. He was good at poker faces, but not teary sentiment.

Fifteen minutes later, Carolyn had thrown her bouquet, directly to Barbara. Stan gave the final toast, even managing to hold his temper when Walter insisted loudly on adding something about lots of little future McGuires. The bride and groom were off. It was eight-forty. Stan went to the bar for a beer.

He surveyed the scene. Mrs. McGuire looked brokenhearted, but not tragic anymore. She hadn't guessed about the reset sapphire and the new diamond. Aunt Matilda and a McGuire woman were showing pictures to each other: grandchildren, no doubt. Even Walter was relatively harmlessly occupied, regaling two women with the story of how he'd driven his car back to the church, brought the groom's car up, and arranged for Aunt Matilda's son, Chester, to take him back to the church to pick up his own car. He sounded louder than usual, and he looked redder than usual, but then, he'd probably had several drinks.

Stan was about to finish his beer and head over to help Mike's mother haul out her sleeping son, when the bartender tapped him on the shoulder. "You're Sheriff Odysek, right?"

Stan nodded.

The bartender held out a phone to him.

"Odysek," Stan said into the receiver.

"Stan, sorry to call at the wedding," Deputy Sheriff Bell said. "But we got a homicide."

The uneasiness Stan had felt for much of the evening hardened. "Who? and where?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Store merchant. Night watchman came on duty and saw a light he didn't think should be on. He went in and found, uh . . ."

Stan heard papers rustle.

"He found the guy. Casey. John Casey's the name. A jeweler."

"Yeah," Stan said, "I know."

Deputy Sheriff Bell did not respond for a moment. "You knew he got murdered?"

"No, no. I knew he was a jeweler. How was he killed?"

"Night watchman says his head is bashed in. A cash register is open. No money in it. Looks like a robbery."

Stan had a hard time imagining the maid of honor holding up her pink gown and bashing in the head of a jeweler. Besides, Barbara had gone to give Casey money, not to get it.

"Okay," Stan said. "You still at the station?"

"Yeah."

"I'll meet you at the Casey place. Call Wilkes Barre for the medical examiner. And ask for a photographer and some fingerprint people. We're going to need help."

He hung up and went over to tell his mother that she'd have to get a ride home from someone else.

Stan arrived at the hole-in-the-wall jewelry store in fifteen minutes.

The medical examiner told him that Casey had died sometime within the last two hours. Head bashed in with some metal instrument. Maybe a tire iron. Sometime between seven and nine.

Stan let Deputy Bell direct the photographer. He decided to check Casey's files. He didn't expect to find anything illuminating. It wouldn't be that easy. But it would help pass time until the fingerprint men came and went.

The first two drawers of the green metal file cabinet proved empty, except for half a bag of Lay's potato chips. The third drawer had one file folder in it. Stan pulled it out, considered eating the chips, rejected the idea, and sat at a wooden desk on which lay a calendar of classic cars and a dirty square of white marble that held down a photo of three men, the middle one, Casey, holding up a hefty trout. The man on the left was Walter Korski.

Stan tucked the photo into his jacket pocket and picked up the first of the pale pink sheets from the folder. On the top of the sheet was the address of a Philadelphia jeweler. Casey had purchased four diamonds: total value—eighty thousand dollars. A second sheet, from a different jeweler, in New York, listed three rubies, two sapphires, and a diamond, for a total value of thirty

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thousand. By the time he'd reached the fifth sheet, Stan had a pretty good idea of what Casey had been up to.

"Jim," he said to his deputy, "take a look at these. What do you make of them?"

Jim studied several of the sheets. "Casey had a better business than I figured."

"Think there's enough people in Bloomsville who could afford these gems?"

"Not likely. So what do we have?"

"Money laundering. Drug money comes up here to Casey. He buys gems wholesale, takes a cut, resells, and returns clean money. Pretty common way for drug dealers to launder their money. Last summer at FBI headquarters in Washington, I saw a display of gems and jewelry confiscated by the FBI."

"You think maybe those two rackets men the FBI asked about had something to do with this?"

"I think we can count on it." Stan decided not to mention yet that his cousin Walter was mixed up in the mess somehow.

"Wait for the fingerprint men," he told his deputy. "I have a couple of people I want to see." He phoned Carolyn's mother for an address and went over to Meade Street to talk to Barbara. She was now a potential witness.

"But that's all I did," Barbara sobbed, face scrubbed clear of its wedding makeup, and turning redder as she brushed away tears. "Carolyn gave me the brooch when she went upstairs. So I took it and the money. I gave him the money. He put in the real diamond in place of the fake. It only took five minutes. Then I left."

"Did you see anyone else in the place? Or near it?"

Barbara shook her head. "I got . . ."

Stan waited while she blew her nose.

"I just got into my car and drove back as fast as I could. I just wanted to help Carolyn."

"I know," Stan said, "I know. You sure you didn't notice any car approaching the place? As you left, maybe?"

Barbara shook her head again.

Stan felt unreasonably disappointed. Murderers, he knew, usually took care that they weren't noticed. But he'd been hoping she'd spotted two men, or, better yet, a skinny guy, about six foot two, balding, rubbing a golfball nose, carrying a tire iron, and heading straight for the jeweler's. Good old Walter, after all, was also a rackets man, if only two-bit, low-level management and not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

too bright. "Okay," Stan said. "If you think of anything, call me. And don't worry. I don't really think you're a murderer."

Barbara brushed away more tears. "Okay. Can I make a phone call?"

"No need for a lawyer," Stan said, smiling.

Barbara looked surprised. "I want to call Edward. My boyfriend."

"Of course, of course. One more question, though. Who picked Casey to fix the brooch? You or Carolyn?"

"Carolyn. That is, her Uncle Walter. He was at her house when the sapphire came out a few days ago. He heard her crying on the phone to me and told her he knew a jeweler who could help right away. She was desperate."

"So you took the brooch down the first time. To get the sapphire put back in?"

"No. Carolyn's uncle took it down that evening and brought it back yesterday in time for the wedding ceremony. But he said the jeweler wouldn't get a matching diamond from Philadelphia until the next day. The day of the wedding. I agreed to go down with the brooch and the money after the bridal dance. Her uncle didn't want to do that. I don't know why not, but I had to help Carolyn."

"I understand," Stan said. "Get some sleep."

Back in his car, he sat for a minute, thinking about time. It had taken him fifteen minutes to get to the jeweler's from Pulaski Hall. Walter had left the hall at about seven forty-five, announcing his departure to the bartender, and returned by eight-thirty or so, in time to add his two cents to the final toast to the bride and groom. So Walter could have murdered Casey, except that he supposedly drove to the church, left his car, and returned with the groom's car—a forty-minute round trip. He couldn't have done both. Unless he'd brought back the groom's car earlier. But then, how had Walter's car gotten down to the church? It had to be there. Walter had arranged for Aunt Matilda's son to take him back to the church to get his car. Chester was annoyingly honest. He wouldn't lie to save Aunt Matilda's life, let alone to save Walter's. Stan reminded himself that he had no proof, only wishful thinking. But he was beginning to understand. He needed to get the brooch to a reputable jeweler.

At the station the next morning, Stan argued with his deputy. "All you have to do," Stan said, "is interrupt a couple on their honeymoon. Call the bride's mother. She'll tell you where they're staying. Keep calling them until they answer. I want to know the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

exact time the groom gave Walter Korski those keys for the car."

"Okay, okay," Deputy Bell grumbled, pouring himself another cup of his fortifying coffee. He was young enough to be embarrassed by questioning people in awkward circumstances.

"I've got the hard part," Stan grumbled back. "I've got to collect that sapphire brooch from the mother-in-law."

Stan, brooch in hand, left his niece's mother-in-law rocking back and forth on her blue-flowered sofa and moaning about "poor William."

At Kartorowski's, the best jeweler in town, and the one from whom Mr. McGuire had purchased the sapphire thirty years ago, Stan waited patiently while old Boleslaw Kartorowski, formal in grey suit and vest, squinted through a loupe at the sapphire brooch. His son Robert stood by. After about two minutes, Boleslaw set the brooch down on the counter. He shook his head slowly. "This stone is not Mrs. McGuire's sapphire." He shook his head again. "Very bad, maybe."

"Glass?" Robert asked.

Boleslaw frowned at his son. "No. No. A child could tell just glass. This is maybe a doublet."

Robert took the loupe and the brooch.

"The sapphire's a phony?" Stan asked.

"No. The diamond," Boleslaw said. "That's a zircon. The sapphire is maybe a doublet. I will check." He took the sapphire and disappeared into a back room.

"What's he going to do?" Stan asked Robert.

"Check the stone with a spectroscope, probably."

Two minutes later, old Kartorowski returned, looking sad. "It is as I thought. Real sapphire. But worth only very little. Slices of pale yellow sapphire on the top and the bottom. Real sapphire. Natural sapphire," Boleslaw nodded his head. "Yes, real, but glued together with a blue glue. A dark blue glue. To make the slices of sapphire look more blue. Without a spectroscope, even a jeweler might be fooled. Who made this doublet?"

"Don't know," Stan said. "Would it take a good deal of skill?"

Kartorowski shrugged. "The real sapphire was emerald cut. Not so difficult. A good cutter might do this in . . ." He shrugged again. ". . . a few days. A cutter in New York or Philadelphia."

"A few days," Stan said to himself. Walter and Casey had had the brooch for a few days. "What was the real sapphire worth?"

Boleslaw's eyes shone. "Ah, now that was a jewel. From Burma, it was. A beautiful emerald cut to show the color. Almost two carats.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Such a deep blue. And such fire. I have not had a finer sapphire since. These days . . . *ppfftt.*" He held out his hands, palms up.

"Worth what?"

"Perhaps five thousand." A five-thousand-dollar sapphire and two diamonds. Maybe seven thousand, all told, Stan thought. With whatever else Casey had had in his cash register. Hardly seemed worth killing for, unless one were desperate. Like, if one's job was to run laundered money from Bloomsville to Harrisburg for the rackets people and maybe one had siphoned some to pay for a new car. Walter was just stupid enough to do that. And just tricky enough to see the opportunity to get Mrs. McGuire's gem and Carolyn's bridal money. And just mean enough to talk Casey into the scheme and then kill him for seven thousand to pay the rackets people and save his own skin.

A day later, Deputy Bell had tracked down the newlyweds. "They're in Montreal," he told Stan. "Frenchy place, but the hotel people spoke English. They put me through. I hated to interrupt. . . ."

"Yeah," Stan said. "I know. So what did you find out?"

"William McGuire, that's the groom . . ."

"I know."

"Oh, yeah. He said he gave Walter Korski the keys at about seven-thirty or so. He kept them until then because he wanted to make sure none of his friends talked Korski into letting them take the keys to trash the car. He said the car was ready and waiting about eight-thirty or so at the reception, just like he and Korski planned. Only problem was, one of the headlights was out. McGuire got stopped up in New York State."

"Damn," Stan said. Walter had an alibi, and he had made sure plenty of people knew it. In a way. No one actually saw him drive the car from the church to the reception, but he had delivered it on time.

"Oh," Deputy Bell said, "I checked on something else. Walter Korski has a new car. A Lexus. Pretty expensive wheels."

"Yeah," Stan said. "Too expensive. Unless Walter did siphon off some racket money."

"Maybe payback time had come. Maybe that's why he needed the sapphire and the bride's money. Maybe he did kill Casey."

"Maybe," Stan said.

Deputy Bell shrugged. "Times won't work, though, because Father Kasmirski at the church said he noticed the Lexus out front at eight-thirty when he went out to give extreme unction to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a parishioner at the hospital." Deputy Bell shivered. "Hate thinking about that stuff. Anyway, Father can't say when the car got there or how long it stayed there."

"Damn," Stan said. Walter had given himself a decent alibi. The family would have their albatross yet. Stan slumped in his chair, then straightened up. Unless luck was on their side. "Jim, get me the traffic citations for Saturday."

"Traffic citations?"

"That's what I said. According to Cousin Walter, we're pretty efficient with traffic tickets around here. Maybe as efficient as the New York State Police."

Jim gave Stan a "you've been working too hard" look, but got the citations.

Stan leafed through and pulled one out. "Jim, old buddy," he said, eyes glowing, "the groom tell you what kind of car he has?"

"Yeah. Let's see, uh, a Taurus. A grey Taurus."

"Grey Taurus." Stan slammed his palm on his desk. "License plate CFG455. One headlight out. We got him."

Deputy Bell frowned. "Got who?"

"Officer Tarantino filled out this report. Saturday at eight-fifteen. Stopped a Taurus with a headlight out. Issued a warning. Driver, a Mister Ralph Garrity. Local juvenile delinquent. Speeds around in an old Mustang." Stan grinned. "Wonder how much Walter paid him to drive his Lexus to the church and the Taurus to the hall. I think I know where Walter drove the Mustang while Garrity was busy. Think I'll have a talk with Garrity."

Two weeks later, Mrs. McGuire knew she would eventually get her real sapphire back. The sapphire was state's evidence. Walter Korski had tried to pay off his debt to the mob with it. But he'd killed Casey for nothing. The mob found the payment inadequate. Walter ended up floating in the Schuylkill River with a bullet in his chest. Like Rasputin, he'd survived. He was ratting on everybody, including Dan McGuire, to save himself. He would have to go into the Federal Witness Protection Program. He'd end up living in some suburb of Seattle or Rapid City. The Korski family was thrilled.

Mrs. McGuire was not happy. The Korskis had only to endure the embarrassment of an exiled black-sheep murderer in the family. The papers hardly spent a day on Walter. Mrs. McGuire had to deal with the senator's very public disgrace. She was very subdued.

Carolyn and William were ecstatic. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MYSTERY THAT WOULDN'T STAY SOLVED

by Edward D. Hoch

The winter after Leopold's second retirement as captain of the Violent Crimes Squad had been long and cold, with more snow than usual on the north shore of Long Island Sound. While his wife Molly went off to work every morning he stayed behind, puttering around the house and trying to get his notes in order for a book he knew he'd never write.

Perhaps that was why he'd welcomed the phone call from a deep-voiced man named Zach Brewster, who introduced himself as a writer of true-crime books. "I understand you're retired now."

"That's right, Mr. Brewster," Leopold said. "What can I do for you?"

With only two stories to go until the Leopold adventures number 100, Edward D. Hoch is still going strong with the series. The retired police-captain sleuth has been freelancing in investigative work for his lawyer wife Molly for the past couple of years, but in the following adventure he's sought out once again for his own expertise as a cop. Although it means revisiting an old case, Leopold is glad to be back in the saddle.

"I have a contract to write a book on the Clemmins case. I thought I might interview you about it."

The Clemmins case. Leopold's memory raced back nine years. "I haven't thought about that one in a long time, though of course it's back in the news right now."

"It certainly is! Look, I'm calling from in town. I've already been to police headquarters and Captain Fletcher gave me your name.

©1997 by Edward D. Hoch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He said it was your case. I'd like to talk to you about it this afternoon, if that's convenient."

"Sure, come ahead. I don't know how much I can tell you. That was a terrible case. Now that the execution is less than a week away the press is onto it again."

"Suppose I come right after lunch, around two o'clock."

"That'll be good, Mr. Brewster. I'll look forward to seeing you."

When Brewster arrived, on schedule, Leopold faced a slim man with bushy black eyebrows. He was a few inches taller than Leopold, and probably twenty years younger. He carried an expensive briefcase, and when he came inside he removed his coat and produced a small tape recorder from the briefcase.

"I hope you don't mind if I tape this," he said, turning it on.

"Go ahead. Since my retirement, my wife Molly's been after me to write a book about my experiences, but I haven't gotten around to it."

Zach Brewster smiled. "This won't interfere with anything you might be writing, Captain. I'm only interested in the Clemmins case. Some papers say there could be new evidence implicating someone else."

"I know there's renewed interest now that the appeals process has been exhausted. But I don't know a thing about new evidence. That's tabloid talk."

"You think they'll go through with the execution?"

Leopold shrugged. "It's been decades since we've had one in this state, but the killing of children is a terrible crime."

Brewster nodded agreement. "The political climate is changing in the country, even in the more liberal Northeast."

"The Clemmins case never satisfied everyone, even after the jury brought in its verdict. People have been arguing about it ever since."

The writer leaned forward in his chair. "Suppose you tell me how it began, nine years ago."

That had been a snowy winter too, Leopold remembered, though by early March the snow on lawns and parking lots had retreated to little gray mounds which would soon be gone. It was a Monday morning and he'd gone into the squadroom early to clear up some paperwork when the first report of the bombing came in.

Lieutenant Fletcher took the call. "Car explosion on Irving Circle, Captain. You want to come with me?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Leopold shook his head. "Not unless I have to. Phone in if you need me."

Fletcher did just that some twenty minutes later. "Captain, you'd better get out here. It looks like a car bomb. Woman and two children dead at the scene."

Car bombs suggested one thing to most city police. "Any mob connections?"

Fletcher hesitated. "I don't know. There might be. The husband's in a state of shock. I haven't been able to question him yet."

"I'll be there."

Irving Circle was a nice street of middle-class homes looping around a grassy area at the center. A patrol car with its lights flashing was blocking the only access when Leopold arrived. He maneuvered around it and waved to the officer, pulling up to park across from an open-doored ambulance and two fire trucks. Virtually every home on the street must have been represented in the crowd of neighbors huddled together and talking among themselves in low voices.

Leopold nodded to the assistant medical examiner and others he knew among the team of investigators. "What have you got, Fletcher?" he asked, staring at the three body bags and the ruined car still leaking water from the fire hoses. The garage door, windowless and steel-clad, was undamaged, as was the minivan inside, but a side door into the garage had its window shattered by the blast. The windows of the house itself seemed intact.

"The woman is Frances Clemmins, the children are Kerry and Ben, ages seven and nine. All killed instantly. The boys from the bomb squad tell me it was under the driver's seat, attached to the ignition."

Leopold glanced at the minivan in the garage. Next to it was a small boat with an outboard motor attached. "Husband at home?"

"Alex Clemmins. He's in the kitchen, in pretty bad shape."

One of the detectives held the door open for him and Leopold stepped inside with Fletcher following. The house was brightly decorated, showing a woman's touch, and the sight of it immediately saddened him. He could see the man in the gray business suit seated at the kitchen table, his head buried in his hands as an older woman—a neighbor?—tried to comfort him.

"Mr. Clemmins?" This was the part of the job he'd always hated. "I'm Captain Leopold from the Violent Crimes Squad. I'm sorry to intrude on your grief at a time like this, but it's important to the investigation that we follow up any possible leads at once."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Clemmins lifted his head, revealing tear-streaked eyes and an expression of utter despair. He had a thin moustache and a receding hairline. "How can I go on after this? Who could have—?"

"Did your wife have any enemies?"

"No one! Everyone loved her."

The woman, around fifty with graying hair, introduced herself as Midge Proud, a neighbor from the next house. "Fran was wonderful," she confirmed. "And those dear children—"

"Did you notice any prowlers during the night, Mrs. Proud?"

She hesitated an instant. "No, but then my husband and I turned in early, before eleven. He has to be off to work by seven."

Because the undamaged car in the garage seemed to be the larger of the two, Leopold asked the obvious question. "Did Mrs. Clemmins usually drive the car she used this morning?"

Alex Clemmins gave a quick shake of his head, as if to clear it, then answered, "Not usually. It was mine, but I was blocking her and she had to take the children to school because they overslept and missed the bus. It often happens on Monday mornings. So I told her to take it. God, it's my fault they're dead!"

"It's no one's fault except the person who planted that bomb. Don't worry, we'll get him. What I need to know from you now is who might have done it. Are there personal or business associates who might want you dead?"

The shattered husband shook his head, still barely able to speak. "No one," he managed to say. "No one who'd do anything like this."

"Your wife's car is in the garage. Was it routine to leave yours in the driveway?"

"It depended. If she was out somewhere and I got home first, I took the garage. Usually mine was in the driveway."

"It's a two-car garage," Leopold pointed out.

"We keep a small boat there in the winter."

"Ever have trouble with prowlers damaging the car?"

"Never." Clemmins's voice was stronger and he seemed to have better control of his emotions. "This is a quiet, law-abiding neighborhood. Even the kids behave themselves."

"This wasn't the work of kids," Leopold pointed out. "What business are you in, Mr. Clemmins?"

"Real estate. I own a movie theater, a couple of bookstores, and some rental property."

"Any disgruntled employees you know about?"

He shook his head. "No."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Write down the addresses of your businesses for Lieutenant Fletcher here. And let us know if you think of anyone at all who might have a grudge against you."

"Is there anything else?" he asked softly.

"Not right now, Mr. Clemmins. This is a terrible thing. You have our sympathy."

Later that afternoon Fletcher came into Leopold's office and sat down. "I've been checking on those addresses Alex Clemmins gave us, Captain."

Leopold caught the tightness in his voice. "What about it?"

"The movie theater is TorridTown, that porno house on Adams Avenue the city's been trying to shut down. The bookstores are pretty much the same thing. Sex books and videos."

"Why didn't we recognize the name? TorridTown's been in the news enough. I thought there was a man named Rockson involved."

"Rockson's been making the court appearances, but he only leases the property. Clemmins owns it."

"With a car bomb and ties to pornography, there could be a mob connection. See what you can find out. Meantime, I'll take a ride out to TorridTown."

The theater had once been a neighborhood picture palace, in the long-ago era when such things existed. Over the decades every other movie house within the city limits had been torn down but somehow this one survived, its name changed from the Odeum to TorridTown. Leopold remembered visiting it once around 1965 to see *The Sound of Music,* but he hadn't been back since they switched to fare like *Deep Throat* and *The Green Door* in the 1970s. Now the titles weren't even listed on the marquee outside.

A slim, brown-bearded man in a turtleneck was selling tickets to occasional customers when Leopold walked up. "Is Mr. Rockson in?"

"He's busy," the man responded without looking up.

Leopold flashed his badge and ID. "Police matter. Is Mr. Rockson in?"

The head came up, the eyes sleepy and sad. "What is this, more harassment?"

"Are you Mr. Rockson?"

"Yeah."

"Could I have a few words with you?"

"About the theater?"

"About three homicides."

That got his attention. "I'll close the ticket window. The show's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

started anyway. We can talk in my office."

Leopold followed him inside, with only a quick glance at the screen. Rockson's office was a tiny room behind the refreshment stand, cluttered with posters going back twenty years. He sat down in a worn swivel chair and asked, "Who's dead?"

"Frances Clemmins and her two children."

"Christ!" He pawed at the desktop for a cigarette. "Who did it?"

"It was a car bomb rigged to her husband's vehicle. We believe he was the intended victim."

"And you came here because he owns the place?"

"That's right. Car bombs require a certain amount of skill. It seems more the work of a professional killer—a mob hit. Are there any mob ties to this theater or the other places Clemmins owns?"

Rockson shook his head. "Nothing that I know about."

"It was all Clemmins's own money in these businesses? He never had visits from partners in New York?"

"Lately I've been busy with court appearances. I don't know what he's been doing."

The bearded man seemed to be avoiding a direct reply. "If you want to stay clear of trouble, you'd better tell me what you know," Leopold warned.

"Well, sure, he might have had a partner. I just lease the place."

"Do you book the films or does he?"

Rockson laughed. "This isn't exactly the Loew's circuit, you know. Someone phones me and says he has a block of films available, maybe a dozen or more. If they sound good and I'm familiar with the actors or the director I say sure, send them along. It doesn't take much to please the sort of audiences I get."

"Does Alex Clemmins ever suggest films or book them for you?"

"No."

His answer was so short that Leopold pursued it. "You're sure of that? Never?"

"He never books films. Once in a while someone calls me and says they got my name from him."

"So he does have some contact with the pornography business, and it's possible someone in that business might have had a motive for trying to kill him."

"Hey, anything's possible." He glanced at his watch. "I gotta go now, if you're finished."

"For the moment."

"Stay for the show if you want to. On the house."

"Thanks anyway."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

Fletcher came back to the office around five. "Clemmins has mob connections, Captain. There's no doubt of it."

"Then he probably knows who tried to kill him. What did you find?"

"The Manhattan office of the FBI notified us last year that he made regular calls to a mob boss who controls porno houses and sex clubs in the Northeast. They had a tap on the guy's phone. From the conversations it seems likely this boss, Billy Cosetti, also known as Billy Goat Cosetti, was some sort of silent partner of Clemmins's."

Leopold sighed. "It looks as if we'll have to get back to Mr. Clemmins."

"Mrs. Proud is here too, if you want to speak to her. She came down to make a statement."

Leopold drew a blank. "Refresh my memory, Fletcher."

"Clemmins's neighbor, the woman we met at his house this morning."

"Of course! Where is she, in the interview room?"

Fletcher nodded. "Connie's with her."

Sergeant Connie Trent rose as Leopold entered the room. "I was just going to buzz you, Captain. I think you should hear what Mrs. Proud has to say."

Midge Proud appeared more attractive than she had at the Clemmins house that morning. The explosion had brought her running from her house during breakfast, but now she'd had time for makeup and grooming. She was still a gray-haired woman around fifty, but now she would be worth a second look.

"Nice to see you again, Mrs. Proud." He shook hands and sat down opposite her.

"Tell the captain what you just told me," Connie urged.

Midge Proud bit nervously at her lip. "I don't want to get anyone in trouble, but I keep thinking about Fran and those poor children."

"It was a terrible crime," Leopold agreed.

"I was telling the sergeant here that I couldn't sleep last night. I got up around one to take a pill and out my bathroom window I noticed Alex just closing the door of the sedan on the driver's side."

Leopold came alert. "Are you sure it was Alex Clemmins you saw?"

"Oh yes. They keep an outside light on at night. I didn't think much of it. I figured he'd left something in the car and come out to get it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"In the middle of the night?"

"They're usually up late. One o'clock wasn't the middle of the night for him."

Leopold had visions of Clemmins checking out the sex films on late-night cable. "Did he have anything in his hand when he left the car?"

"I didn't notice anything."

"Mrs. Proud, do you think Alex Clemmins could have been responsible for the death of his wife and children?"

"No. I can't believe that."

"And yet—"

"I just felt I should tell you what I saw."

"And thank you for doing so. Connie will take down your statement and have you sign it."

Leopold and Fletcher waited until late the following morning to pay another call on Alex Clemmins. By that time Fletcher had come up with information from Clemmins's bank and insurance company. The bereaved man answered the door himself, looking pale and drawn.

"Does this have to be today, Captain?" he pleaded. "I'm due at the funeral parlor in an hour."

"I'm afraid it can't wait, sir. We're at a crucial stage in the homicide investigation." They followed him inside.

"Your men were poking around the place all day yesterday—"

"Mr. Clemmins, I have to ask you about your dealings with a man named Billy Cosetti, sometimes called Billy Goat."

"I—" He shook his head, suddenly at a loss for words.

"He controls most of the pornography outlets in the Northeast, including your little operation in this city."

"I barely know the man," Clemmins insisted, recovering somewhat.

"Two weeks ago you tried to borrow three hundred thousand dollars from your bank here in town. They turned you down. Would you mind telling me what that money was for?"

"It was a business venture. I wanted to expand my theater holdings. Fran was urging me to get out of the sex business and buy into a first-run movie house in the suburbs, one of those with two or three screens. I agreed to try but the bank wouldn't go along."

Fletcher interrupted at this point. "You told your banker you needed the money to pay off some loans."

"Well, that too."

"Were these loans from Billy Goat Cosetti?" Leopold asked.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Some of them," he admitted reluctantly.

"Mr. Clemmins, how much insurance did you carry on the lives of your wife and children?"

"Insurance? I don't remember exactly. The usual amount."

"One hundred thousand dollars on each of them. That's the exact amount you tried to borrow from the bank."

Clemmins's face twisted with sudden rage. "What are you trying to say—that I killed them for the insurance?"

"We're just investigating all the possibilities," Leopold said quietly.

"You're out of your minds, both of you!"

"Mr. Clemmins, we have a witness who saw you out at your car around one o'clock yesterday morning. You told us it was your idea that your wife and children take your car."

Alex Clemmins moistened his lips. "I want a lawyer."

Fletcher produced a folded document from his pocket. "We have a search warrant here for your house and garage."

"I want a lawyer," he repeated.

The bomb that killed Frances Clemmins and her two children had contained several sticks of dynamite and a detonator attached to the ignition. In the garage, wrapped in a dirty rag and inside an old tire, Fletcher found two additional sticks of dynamite and some electrical wire of the type used in the bombing. Alex Clemmins denied any knowledge of them.

Two days later, following the funerals of his wife and children, Clemmins was formally charged with their murder and the district attorney began building a case for presentation to the grand jury the following week. That was what took Leopold to New York City, to question Billy Goat Cosetti.

The Northeast's King of Porn wasn't in a topless bar or a bordello. Leopold found him in a Brooklyn warehouse, frowning over a clipboard of invoices while a forklift hoisted a pallet loaded with shrink-wrapped videotapes. He was a squat man with almost no hair, probably well past fifty. "You're the one who called me," he said, keeping the frown as he studied Leopold. "What can I do for you, Captain?"

"We're investigating the murder of Frances Clemmins and her two children. As I told you on the phone, we've arrested her husband."

"Alex Clemmins. Yeah, I've had some dealings with him. Come into the office and we'll talk."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The office was larger than Rockson's tiny room at the Torrid-Town theater but no neater. Leopold had to move a pile of paper-bound books off a chair so he could sit down. "Mr. Cosetti, I'll come right to the point. We have a report that Alex Clemmins owed you a considerable amount of money. Is that accurate?"

The squat man lit a cigar and shrugged. "Depends what you mean by a considerable amount. His operations there haven't been doing well. You got a very conservative town, Captain."

"Let's cut the games. How much is he into you for?"

"I don't even know. That's the truth."

"Take a guess."

Billy Goat shrugged. "A hundred grand, maybe. It's a lot of money."

"Could it be three hundred grand?"

"I doubt if it's that high." He shifted uneasily, not enjoying the conversation. "But, see, I put up the money for theater renovations, and then I did the same thing for the bookstores. Nothing's cheap these days."

"You supplied him with the films?"

"There's a fellow named Rockson who leases the place. My guy contacts him. Maybe he's been ripping Clemmins off. I'm not involved in that. I just know I got money coming."

"Would you kill him if you didn't get it?"

"You got the wrong idea about me, pal." He stood up, brushing some cigar ash from his pants. "You'll have to excuse me now."

Leopold took the train back home, wondering if the trip had been worth it.

Alex Clemmins was indicted and brought to trial amidst a media frenzy that ran on for months. The case against him was based upon three factors: He had the motive of needing money to pay off a loan from Billy Cosetti; he had the means, as shown by the two extra sticks of dynamite and wire hidden in his locked garage; and he had the opportunity, as sworn to by Midge Proud, who'd seen him by the car at one in the morning. Furthermore, he knew the children were often late on Monday mornings and he could urge his wife to take them to school in his car.

The murder of children, especially by a parent, always brought forth a public outcry. When the D.A. announced he would seek the death penalty only a few voices were raised against him. Presenting the state's case in court, he showed that the wire and the sticks of dynamite were the same type used in the bomb. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

overhead door and the side door to the garage had both been locked, making it unlikely an outsider could have planted them there. And Clemmins's neighbor had no reason to lie about seeing him. They'd always been on good terms.

Defense attorneys argued that Clemmins was being prosecuted because of links to the pornography industry, and that could well have been a factor against him in the public's mind. The defense put him on the stand, where he vehemently denied all charges. The dynamite was not his and he had never hidden it in the garage. Midge Proud had seen him at one in the morning because he'd gone out to the car to have a smoke before bedtime. Fran hadn't liked him smoking in the house. The fact that he'd been denied a bank loan in the exact amount of his wife and children's insurance was nothing but a coincidence. He hadn't owed Cosetti that much but had tried to borrow a little extra so he could open another store. He told the jury he was convinced the mob boss had ordered him killed because of the unpaid debt.

The jury debated for three days before returning a verdict of Guilty against Alex Clemmins. That had been almost nine years ago.

Leopold was surprised to realize he'd been talking for nearly two hours when he finally reached the end of his story. Through it all Zach Brewster had sat spellbound on the sofa without moving except to ask the spelling of names and enter them on the yellow notepad on his lap. Now he said, "That's quite a story, Captain."

"I can hardly credit it to good police work," Leopold told him. "If the neighbor hadn't come forward we might never have gotten the break we needed."

"There was the dynamite in the garage."

"We had no reason to search for it. I still find it hard to believe he killed them just for the insurance."

Brewster put his pad and tape recorder into the briefcase. He took out a handful of newspaper reports, clipped together, and passed them over. Leopold saw again the press photos of the scene, the shell of the blackened car, the garage with its broken window in the side door. "Are these accounts fairly accurate, Captain?"

He glanced through a couple. "As accurate as the press usually is. The first reports usually need correcting as more facts come in." He handed back the clippings.

Brewster showed Leopold a folded cellular phone he carried in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his jacket pocket. "I expect to be in town until tomorrow. If you think of anything else, you might give me a call on my cell phone."

Leopold nodded. "They're handy gadgets. My wife gave me one for Christmas."

He jotted down the number and handed it to Leopold. "Thanks for your time, Captain," he said, closing his briefcase.

"These days I've got nothing but time, Mr. Brewster."

The rest of the afternoon was free so Leopold took a ride down to headquarters. He rarely visited it these days, though he and Molly continued to see Fletcher and his wife socially every month or so. The place seemed to be running just as well without him and he was happy for Fletcher's success.

It was Connie Trent who greeted him as he walked in. "I thought you'd forgotten how to get here, Captain! How've you been?"

"Can't complain, at my age."

She grinned at him. "Thinking about coming back again?"

"I think I already came back once too often. Where's the captain?"

"You'll always be the captain around here, but if you mean Fletcher he's back in his office."

"Thanks, Connie."

Fletcher had recognized his voice and was already coming out to meet him. "Don't tell me! You're here about the Clemmins case."

It was Leopold's turn to smile. "You've been talking to Zach Brewster."

"Hell, sometimes I feel like I spend my whole day talking to writers and journalists. How've you been? How's Molly?"

"She's great. I'm just trying to keep busy."

"I told Brewster there was nothing new in the case but he wanted to interview the detective in charge of the investigation. I said you were retired and he asked for your phone number. I figured you could say no if you didn't want to see him, but I gave you a great buildup. Said you were like a bulldog in pursuing old cases, even though you're retired."

"I talked for about two hours," Leopold admitted. He frowned at a sudden thought.

"What's the matter, Captain?"

"Nothing. It was just that—Are the files on the Clemmins case still in the back room or have they gone off to the warehouse?"

"I've been keeping them here through all the appeals, just in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

case they were needed again. What are you looking for?"

"Didn't we have a diagram of the Clemmins house and its neighbors, showing the sight line from Midge Proud's window to the Clemmins car?"

"We sure did. As it turned out, they didn't need it in court because he admitted being out there around one o'clock for a smoke."

"Let's see if we can find it."

Leopold had always avoided trips to the warehouse at any cost, and the records room at headquarters wasn't much better. After they brushed off the dust, they were left with a thick cardboard file folder secured with a broken rubber band and a discolored ribbon. "We must get organized," Fletcher muttered.

"Ask the city fathers for more money so you can hire a couple of clerks."

"Sure! What do you think our chances are?" He carried the bulging folder to a work table and let the files and reports slide out of it.

Leopold recognized his handwriting on a number of documents and felt the years fall away. He was remembering the scene again, and Alex Clemmins's protestations of innocence. "Here it is!" He unfolded a diagram of the houses.

Fletcher squinted at it. "I remember now. This dotted line indicates the line of sight from Mrs. Proud's window. Is that what you wanted to check?"

"Not exactly. Look, Fletcher—this door on the side of the garage, where the window was broken. It's not visible to someone coming out the front door of the house and walking straight to a car in the driveway."

"What difference does that make?"

"None of the windows in the house were broken by the explosion. Why should that one at the side of the garage have broken?"

Fletcher shrugged. "I never thought about it. Shock waves can do funny things sometimes. What other explanation could there be?"

"Suppose the killer was a professional hit man hired by Billy Goat Cosetti. Suppose once he was on the scene he realized he had too much dynamite for the job. His target was one man, Alex Clemmins, and he didn't want to harm the family. He might have removed two sticks of dynamite to better limit the area of the blast, then hidden them and the extra electrical wire at the scene to avoid being caught with these items in his possession. He broke the window after planting the bomb, muffling the sound with a cloth, reached in and turned the bolt from inside the door. Then

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he hid the dynamite in that old tire and left the same way, locking the door behind him."

Fletcher's eyes narrowed. "It wouldn't have to be a hit man. Maybe that neighbor Mrs. Proud planted the bomb herself and didn't want her house to be damaged."

"Somehow I don't see Midge Proud or most women as bombers, Fletcher. It's a man's weapon. Besides, she was only a few steps from her own house. She could have hidden the dynamite there, or even buried it in the garden temporarily. And she'd be aware that Alex and Fran Clemmins sometimes switched cars, something the killer apparently didn't know."

"What's the bottom line on this, Captain?"

"It didn't have to be Alex Clemmins who hid that dynamite, and probably wasn't. Fran and the kids would have needed their coats in March, and hers at least was probably kept in a closet by the front door. If they came out that way they wouldn't have seen the broken garage window. If the dynamite was planted, one of the three cornerstones of the case is flawed. And how about the other two? He had an explanation for being in the car at one in the morning, and the amount of the insurance could have been a coincidence, as he claimed."

"After nine years you're telling me you don't think Clemmins is guilty?"

"I'm saying the evidence that convicted him might be flawed."

"The execution is only six days away, Captain."

"I know that. Is Rockson still running TorridTown?"

"You haven't been following the papers. After all these years the city finally got a restraining order against him. The theater has been closed for a month, though I guess he still has an office there."

Leopold glanced at his watch. "I guess I might take a drive over there."

"Don't get involved," Fletcher cautioned. "It's not your job anymore. I'll go see him in the morning."

Leopold drove home for dinner but the house was empty and he remembered that Molly had a meeting of her women lawyers' group that night. He was already planning to ignore Fletcher's advice and that decided him. He went upstairs to the bedroom and dug out the .38-caliber revolver he was licensed to carry as a private citizen. If he was going to seek out Rockson he had to be prepared for anything. As he was leaving the house he remembered the cell phone Molly had given him and that went into his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pocket too, just in case he needed help in a hurry.

The area around the TorridTown theater and bookstore had deteriorated badly since his visit nine years earlier. Though Rockson still kept the marquee lit in promise of some future reopening, the place seemed deserted. Leopold was a bit surprised to find the lobby door unlocked. He entered and walked past the deserted box office, across the small lobby to the empty refreshment stand and the office beyond it. The office was empty, but one of Rockson's cigarettes still burned in the ashtray.

Leopold stepped out of the office and glanced around. If he was still in the building he could only have gone into the theater auditorium itself. Passing through the swinging doors, Leopold suddenly found himself in total darkness. "Rockson!" he shouted.

The place seemed deserted and he shouted the name again. "Rockson! I want to talk to you. It's Captain Leopold." Just for the moment, he thought, back from retirement.

Still silence.

He called the name once more and there was the flash and crack of a gunshot from the direction of the side aisle. He heard the thump of a bullet hitting one of the seat arms, and dropped to the floor in a sudden reflex action. He rolled over on his side and pulled his own weapon free.

Crawling along in the dark behind the seats he called out, "I know the truth. Throw down your gun!"

Another shot cracked out, from somewhere up near the screen. The gunman was circling, trying to get around the other side. Leopold wished the exit lights were on, but right now violations of the fire code were the least of his worries. He thought he heard a sound and stood up in a crouch. There was nothing but darkness around him.

He felt the cell phone in his pocket and found the key pad in the dark, keeping it in there to muffle the beeps as he pressed the numbers. Now if he could just remember it correctly—

First the power button, then the numbers. "Police! Throw down your gun," Leopold shouted again to further cover the muffled beeps. This time there was no answering shot. His assailant was moving closer in the dark, saving his bullets till there was a clear target.

Leopold raised his own gun and pressed the final button on his cell phone. Suddenly there was a muffled ring not twenty feet behind him. He whirled and fired a single shot at the sound.

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ten minutes later the lights in the theater were up, and the place was far from empty. Two patrol cars and an ambulance had responded to Leopold's 911 call, and now Captain Fletcher was hurrying down the center aisle. "What in hell happened here?" he wanted to know.

"I got him in the hip," Leopold explained, motioning toward the man being gently slid onto the ambulance gurney. "It was a shot in the dark, in more ways than one."

"It's Zach Brewster, that writer!"

Leopold nodded. "I believe he's the man who planted the bomb in Clemmins's car nine years ago."

They were interrupted by an officer calling from the back of the theater. "We've got a body here, Captain!"

It was Rockson, the TorridTown manager, and he'd been shot in the head at close range. Leopold stared down at the body. "So that's what he was doing here. If I'd arrived five minutes earlier I might have prevented this."

"You'd better explain," Fletcher said.

"All this recent publicity about next week's execution and possible new evidence must have worried Brewster—and maybe his boss, Billy Goat Cosetti. Brewster posed as an author working on a book and called on you for information. You gave me a big buildup and almost got me killed."

"Sorry about that," Fletcher said.

"He gave me his cellular phone number so I could call him if I remembered anything else. When someone shot at me here in the dark I took a chance that it was him and punched in his number on my own cell phone. His phone rang and I fired at the sound."

"You took a chance it was him?" Fletcher repeated. "Why would you even suspect him?"

"He was supposedly recording the interview with me on a small tape recorder, as writers often do. Those tapes only record about forty-five minutes per side. I talked for two hours and he hardly moved at all during that time, never changed tapes and didn't even turn it over. If he wasn't a writer, I got to wondering what he really was. They must have thought Rockson was getting ready to tell what he knew, so Brewster came here to ask some questions and then silence Rockson, just in case."

Fletcher watched them wheeling the wounded man out to the ambulance. "Do you think he's ready to implicate Cosetti?"

"I'd bet on it. And I'd bet the governor is ready to delay Clemmins's execution too!"●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

SINCE MY LAST CONFESSION

by Nick Schinker

In these first few minutes of exhausted sleep, he would have ignored it all, had he been alone.

His awareness began with the bells. From the steeple. No, too steady. Too hollow. Too rude. Had to be the phone. Then came the knocking, a light rap that grew steadily to a thump, thump, thump. Like that of his heart . . .

"Yes?" he called out from the dark.

"Fadder Jerome?" The accent belonged to Magda, the 8,000-year-old Hungarian woman who served as the rectory housekeeper. "You awake?"

A University of Nebraska journalism graduate, Nick Schinker spent a decade working as a reporter, covering law enforcement and crime. Six years ago, with two national awards and several local honors to his credit, he decided to become a freelance journalist in order to gain more spare time for writing fiction. His debut piece testifies to time well spent. We salute a promising new writer. ¶

His eyes had barely adjusted to the light spilling into the room from the hallway when his hand found the switch on the bedside lamp. He winced at the sudden brightness of the 75-watt bulb. "Yes, I am awake. What is it?"

"A call for you," Magda said. "From Lincoln."

©1997 by Nick Schinker

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG.
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The president," he asked, "or the city?"

The old woman didn't understand, as was the case with the best of his jokes, and the worst ones, too. "A man," she said matter-of-factly. "At da prison."

The prison? "Are you sure?"

Magda shrugged and nodded simultaneously, silent responses she had learned to combine and apply successfully to nearly any perplexing situation.

He reached out to the nightstand, to the rotary telephone with the ringer he'd permanently disabled two weeks after taking over as pastor and sole proprietor of St. Rose Church. Fumbling the headset, he managed to catch it as it fell and lift it to his ear. "Father Hill here. Who is speaking, please?"

He listened for two minutes, quiet but intent, nodding occasionally as he made mental notes. "But I don't understand," he said finally. "Why me?"

He nodded once more, then hung up.

The associate warden's answer echoed through the recesses of his mind. *Because Gary Hoover requested you.* He sat on the edge of the bed, stunned. Reaching again to the nightstand, he swatted at the faded lace doily, searching for the familiar shape of his glasses and their thick prescription lenses. Tucking the wire frames behind his ears, he said nothing, his mind drifting, his fingers tugging unconsciously at one corner of his thick, dark moustache.

"Fadder?"

Magda's voice startled him, though he should have been aware of her stocky form loitering in the open doorway.

"Fadder?" she repeated. "Bad news?"

The first fifteen miles of the thirty-one-minute trip to Lincoln was a two-lane stretch of asphalt winding past fields lush with midseason corn and soybeans. In the light from a full moon he saw two raccoons nosing a fresh carcass alongside the road and, a mile or two later, a fawn darting into a grove of apple trees. But not another human soul.

Had he stayed in bed, he doubted he could have dreamed his current mission. Like everyone in the state, he had read the recent accounts of Gary Hoover's pending execution. He'd skimmed over the grisly details of the two murders that sweltering summer of 1962. All too well he remembered how the boys had been snatched as they rode their bicycles to church on consecutive Sunday morn-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ings, their bikes found abandoned. How they had been driven out of the city to the country, to fertile fields much like those Father Jerome now passed in his car. How both had been stripped and tied up like rodeo calves. How they weren't stabbed to death, but sliced . . .

Unlike his fellow seminarians at St. Michael's, Jerome Hill was shocked when three weeks after the second murder police arrested twenty-two-year-old Gary Hoover. He recalled Hoover from his own high-school years, when he attended St. Peter's and Hoover was a star at crosstown rival Pope Pius X. Talented in baseball and track, Hoover was a top contender in the long jump for two years at the state track meet. Not good enough, however, to garner a college scholarship.

When arrested, Gary Hoover was employed with the Lincoln parks department, assigned to the inner-city neighborhoods, using a coat of paint to make worn playground equipment look new. He was a bachelor and a member of St. Benedict Church, where he sang in the choir and was a regular at the singles mixers in the church hall. He was an Eagle Scout and an assistant scoutmaster. He had never been arrested; never even received a speeding ticket. And he had taken part as a volunteer during the searches when the two boys were still "missing." It didn't matter.

Throughout the eight-day trial, Hoover maintained a simple defense: When the boys disappeared, he was at home. Asleep. He insisted it was the truth. That, too, didn't matter.

State detectives presented as evidence samples of the rope used to bind the boys' wrists and ankles. They said it was identical to a length of rope found in the trunk of Hoover's '57 Chevy. They had a witness who saw a car just like Hoover's moments after one of the boys passed her home on his bike. They said Hoover "could have" sneaked from his home at the time the boys disappeared. Called separately, his elderly parents, with whom Gary still lived, testified that once he turned eighteen they never kept precise track of his comings and goings.

And, with the victims' families present in the courtroom, prosecutors finished by showing the jury a half-dozen photos of the dead boys. Color photos.

Hoover's decrepit, alcoholic attorney had been appointed by the court after his family was judged to fit the term "indigent." The old man put up quite a fight, sweating heavily as he countered each blow. He said the rope was a common variety used by boy scouts

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

across the country. And though it was true police found similar rope in Hoover's car, he pointed out that it was the only "so-called evidence" detectives could find there. No traces of blood. No hair or fiber samples that could be linked to the boys. No knife. He reminded the jury that, in fact, the murder weapon was never found. He quoted automobile registration figures for the county to show Hoover's car was a popular model. He called an optometrist to testify that the "eye witness" wore lenses to the fifteenth power, then got the witness to admit she didn't have them on the morning of the boy's disappearance. And, the attorney said, "not a solitary soul" had seen Gary Hoover near either victim, or the remote areas where the bodies were found. As his final card, he put Hoover in the box. The young man swore through teary eyes that not only had he never seen either boy in his life, he personally mourned their deaths.

Trouble was, Gary Hoover was black. Both victims, like all twelve members of the jury that uncomfortable summer, were white as Wonder bread. After less than a day's deliberation, Gary Hoover was found guilty of two counts of first-degree murder, two counts of kidnapping, two counts of use of a weapon to commit a felony, two counts of battery, two counts of being *different*. . . .

Exactly one month after his jury trial ended, a three-judge panel handed down the only sentence that a boisterous media claimed would "calm the violent storm brewing." Death in the electric chair.

Upon leaving the packed courtroom, Gary Hoover's father suffered a massive heart attack. Slipping through his wife's arms, he collapsed to the cold marble floor of the crowded corridor and died before they could lay him on a stretcher.

That very day, a troubled Jerome Hill confessed to his fellow seminarians his serious doubts that justice had been served. Now, after fourteen summers and countless failed appeals, Gary Hoover had personally requested that Father Jerome Hill of St. Rose Church be the priest to hear his last confession. He could not understand for a moment why. Though he knew well who Gary Hoover was, they'd never spoken. Never even met.

And, after 2:01 A.M. tomorrow, they were certain never to meet again.

Piloting his dusty sedan—a hail-pocked, seven-year-old Ford Falcon which he'd procured at a "substantial discount" through the parish's used-car dealer—he parked in the last of five empty spaces marked Visitor. Across from the penitentiary parking lot stood a group of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

maybe two hundred people, mostly young, some carrying candles, others carrying signs. News reporters focused their television lights and cameras on the signs, and he could read some of them. One said, "Shed No More Innocent Blood." Another read: "The State Must Follow God's Commandments Too." Oddly, he saw only a few dozen death-penalty supporters, a group whose presence was so boldly evident at other executions. Apparently they too had doubts about Gary Hoover. Or perhaps in America's glorious bicentennial, racism was no longer fashionable. He hoped for a little of both.

From the crowd someone yelled, "Tell Gary we love him, Father!" He nodded but said nothing in reply, the television lights turning to chase him into the building.

Inside, he walked down the long hallway to the visitors desk. It was normally closed this time of night, but this was no normal night at the prison. A pending execution means a lockdown, extra guards, and an uneasy tension on both sides of the iron bars. The stress was evident on the faces of the trio in beige uniforms manning the desk.

"I'm Father Jerome Hill," he said, forcing a smile.

"Right," said the eldest guard. "Need to see some ID."

He took his driver's license from his wallet and handed it over. "And you are?"

"Very tired, Father," the guard replied, not bothering to look up.

After the guards each took a turn checking the priest's license, he was led to a room off to the side of the waiting area, a room he presumed would contain Gary Hoover. It proved no bigger than a closet. And it was empty.

"Okay, Father," the guard said. "Strip."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't make policy. Really, it ain't no picnic for me, either."

Ten minutes later, he was led back into the waiting room and told politely to take a seat. Angry and embarrassed, he silently wished to be anywhere else, doing anything else. Then he said a prayer, a quick Hail Mary, asking God to forgive his weakness.

From the speaker in the ceiling came a tinny, orchestrated version of the Beatles' "Hey, Jude." Deeper in the building he could hear the occasional clang of iron doors, and the sound of electronic buzzers as guards made their rounds.

His eyes grew heavy as he listened and waited, and he fell asleep.

Awakened fifteen minutes later by the guard from the strip-search, Father Jerome was led into another small room. The white walls

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

practically glowed, awash in fluorescent light. There was a table with chrome legs and a bare metal top. The legs were bolted to the floor. There were two chairs, the lightweight kind with one-piece molded gray plastic seats. At the top of one wall was a clock, a General Electric with a round white face and simple black hands and numbers. Without its dark rim, it would have been impossible to read against the sterile walls. Up near the ceiling in the far corner was a closed-circuit TV camera. There was no red light to indicate it was on, but he supposed it was.

He was just becoming comfortable with the room when the steel door creaked open. Standing in front of two guards was Gary Hoover. He was dressed in an orange jumpsuit. Their eyes were level and met instantly. But it was one of the guards who spoke first, motioning to the clock. It was half past midnight.

"You got one hour, Gary," he said. "Don't waste it."

Father Jerome's eyes dropped to Hoover's arms, then to his ankles. He was surprised to see there were no handcuffs, no shackles. The guard mistook it for fear. "Don't worry, Father," he assured. "He's harmless."

"There's a good reason for that, Lloyd," Hoover said. "I'm innocent."

"Oh, yeah," the guard said, touching his forehead. "How could I forget?"

Father Jerome found it curious that Hoover's expression hadn't changed with the challenge. He didn't even look back at the guard, though he called him by name. Only his lips moved.

"If this is to be a confessional," Hoover continued, "turn off the camera."

"It is off," the guard replied.

"Then unplug it."

The guard's face was turning red. "There's no damn need."

"A condemned man's last confession is considered private," Hoover argued, "by the Catholic Church, the State of Nebraska, and the United States Supreme Court. Do the right thing and unplug it, Lloyd. *Please.*"

The guard grunted and kicked one of the chairs over to the corner. There was a single screw securing the plug to the wall, enough of an anchor to allow time for the keepers to storm the room, should anyone try to remove it. "Harry," he said to his partner. "You got a screwdriver?"

Harry shook his head.

"Nail file? A coin or something?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Harry scrounged in his pockets, producing a nickel and two dimes. Lloyd took one of the dimes from Harry's outstretched hand and removed the screw, then jerked the plug from the wall.

The guards left the room and double-locked the door. Hoover took the chair at the table. Father Jerome pulled the other from the corner and sat across from him.

With his fingers Hoover traced a cross, first on his forehead, then his lips, then his chest. "Bless me, Father," he began, "for I have sinned. It has been fourteen years since my last confession. These are my sins."

Father Jerome took a small purple vestment from his jacket pocket and put it to his lips, then lifted it over his head. "Go on."

Hoover confessed that he'd cursed, lied, and had lewd thoughts while confined.

"What else?"

Hoover cocked his head to one side. Without knowing it, he glanced to the camera. "Isn't it true, Father," he said, "that people have different definitions of sin?"

"What do you mean?"

He shifted his weight and crossed his legs. "Is it true that what one man determines to be a sin," he said, "may not be that way for his neighbor?"

"Perhaps with venial sins. But I don't believe that's true for mortal sins. As far as the Church is concerned, breaking a commandment, after all, is just that."

"In here, they call them 'Satan's Top Ten.'"

Father Jerome smiled.

"And for mortal sin, there is absolution?"

"It depends."

"In cases with extenuating circumstances?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Like an execution?"

"Gary. What are you trying so hard not to say?"

"Aren't you wondering," Hoover said, staring into the priest's eyes as though they were tiny mirrors, "why I asked for you?"

Father Jerome looked away, to the floor. "Ever since I answered the phone."

"Tell me something. When did you first realize you were black?"

He looked up at Hoover. "What?"

"You know." Hoover was more than staring into his eyes now. He was searching. "When did you first realize the color of your skin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

made a difference with other people? With white people?"

"I can't recall."

"Sure you can. I know I can. It was a Sunday morning, clean blue sky, right after a rain. I was twelve years old, just turned. I wanted to be an altar boy very badly. So I worked up the nerve and went into the sacristy after Mass. I asked the monsignor if I could sign up. Know what that old relic said?"

"No."

"He told me colored boys couldn't serve on the altar. He said it was because there was no place for colored people in God's Kingdom. Not in this world, he said, or in the next. Evidently, to him the Pearly Gates worked like a filter."

"That is unfortunate, Gary, but things have changed. That monsignor probably died a long time ago. So did his way of thinking."

"Oh, he's dead all right. That one didn't count."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you ever wonder why it was two altar boys who died, Father?"

For the first time, Hoover's eyes dropped and his expression changed. The look was one of embarrassed admission. Father Jerome recognized it immediately. He'd seen it many times before in his work. It was guilt.

"Sweet Jesus," he said. "Is this why you asked me here? To tell me you *did* kill those boys?"

Hoover leaned close to the priest, their knees almost touching. He put his hands on Father Jerome's shoulders. "Yes, Father," he said. "Two very young boys and one very old priest."

"The monsignor? How?"

"Scared him to death, really. Never touched him. That's why I said that he didn't count."

Father Jerome was heartsick.

"What's my penance?"

"You expect absolution?"

"I *expect* nothing more than I see."

"Why tell me this? You could have asked for any priest. Why me?"

"Look at us," Hoover said. "You and I could be brothers; twins even. Same age. Same height and weight; eyes. Same olive complexion, as though we were born trying to pass. I've watched you, followed you ever since I first saw your picture in the local Catholic weekly. A black priest is pretty damn rare, you know. Made everything you did newsworthy. So I had a friend send me one of your old

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

high-school yearbooks. It was like looking in a goddamned mirror. I'm sure you noticed it. I'll bet white people especially liked to point it out to you. That would explain your moustache."

Hoover inched closer. "It's only inside where we're different, Father. We've both seen it, you and I, what hides beneath the surface of a man's skin. Good may struggle, but evil survives."

The priest shook his head, tears welling in his eyes. "All along, you've said you were innocent. I believed you. People supported you, prayed for you, fought for you. How could you lie to us?"

"Believe me, lying was the easy part."

Father Jerome couldn't believe anything. "There are hundreds of people outside who fear that an innocent man is about to be sacrificed to a system."

For the very first time tonight, Hoover smiled. "Then we can't disappoint them."

Without warning, he slammed the top of his skull against the priest's forehead.

Once was enough.

Father Jerome came to and blinked hard. He did not know how much time had elapsed, nor was he able to tell. The room was a blur, out of focus and moving so slowly. Colors seemed to swirl in the air as he turned his aching head side to side. He needed his glasses, but he couldn't see far enough to find them. He could barely make out the nearest wall, much less any other landmark. Until he heard voices.

"He started to faint," a man was saying. "Then he fell forward and hit his head on the table. He was out only a moment or two."

Across the room, he could sense an open doorway and three figures. Two of the images were mostly beige. The third was dressed in black.

"Are you sure you're all right?" It was one of the beige men speaking. He could see a dark slit, a mouth moving as he heard the words. His own mouth hurt. No, it was his lip. He touched the skin beneath his nose and sensed a fresh cut, a quarter-inch-long slice, moist with blood. Where his moustache used to be . . .

"I'm fine, I assure you," replied the man in black. "I am worried about his head, though. There's a bruise."

He could make out that voice now. He'd just heard it a few minutes ago. He couldn't remember the name. He couldn't remember, but he knew that voice was why he was here. Wherever here was.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's okay," a beige voice said. "A half-hour from now it won't make any difference."

He tried to speak. "Wait a minute," the words coming slowly, like from a drunken mind. "Who is talking, please? Where am I?"

The answer was laughter.

"Can you believe that?" the second beige man said. "His curtain call and he offers us amnesia."

"Please, gentlemen," the man in black cautioned. "Treat Mr. Hoover with some dignity."

Hoover. That was the name. Something Hoover. Greg. No, not Greg. Something like Greg.

"Tell us the truth." It was one of the beige figures speaking. "Is he the saint he claims to be?"

The man in black seemed to be shaking his head. "God forgive me for saying this, but the world's going to be a better place without him."

He waved a hand at the blurs. "Excuse me. Without who?"

More laughter, a bit restrained this time.

One of the beige images reached out for the image in black. "Sorry. We knew this wouldn't be easy. Do you want to stay with him until the end, Father?"

Father? *Father?* "But I'm . . ."

"No," the black image replied. "No matter what I think of the man, I cannot condone his murder. Breaking a commandment, after all, *is just that.*"

Recognizing his own words, Jerome Hill tried to stand but his legs were weak as straw. "Wait a minute," he said, slumping back into the chair, his voice raised halfway to a yell. "You must be mistaken."

"True to the end, huh, Hoover?" said one of the beige images, coming closer. "Still an innocent man?"

When the figure neared, he could make out the guard's uniform as the big man reached out and took his left hand. "We already thought of that, remember?" The guard rolled back the bright orange sleeve covering the priest's arm. There, written on his amber skin in thick black marker, were five letters, maybe, or numbers. Squinting without his glasses, Father Jerome could not be sure.

"Nine-seven-six-seven-seven," the guard announced loudly. "See? It's you, Hoover."

Outside the prison, the priest took the Ford key from his pants pocket and slipped it into the ignition, backing the dusty sedan out

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the space reserved for visitors. He tucked his eyeglasses into his jacket pocket where they settled against his tiny "tool kit," a miniature pouch containing the razor blade and laundry marker he'd managed to conceal earlier in the hollowed-out sole of a sneaker. He stopped at the edge of the parking lot to wave at the crowd with the candles across the road. Then, with a touch of the brake lights, the Ford disappeared into the passing traffic.

He drove around the city awhile, breathing in the heavy night air. Near the edge of town, he noticed several young boys out well past curfew. They were riding bicycles, and when they saw his clerical collar as he slowed the car, they stopped and smiled. He posed no threat to them. A priest never did. White or black.

He leaned out the open window. "You boys should be home," he called.

"Okay, Father," one of them replied, giggling. "That's where we're going. Trust me."

He smiled for the second time this muggy mid-July night. "Remember, boys," he warned. "The devil hides in the dark."

The teens turned their bikes and rode off, waving their goodbyes.

Setting his left arm on the car's window sill, he pushed back the sleeve of his black jacket to check his wristwatch. The light from the full moon made the dial easy to read. It was 2:06 A.M. Time to go home.

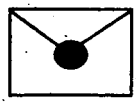
As he looked away from the watch he saw it. There on his arm, peeking from beneath the worn fabric of his sleeve, was a number, the number 7, written on the skin in permanent black marker. He touched his tongue and rubbed at the ink. It faded a bit, transferring onto his fingertip.

It wouldn't be permanent for long, he thought. Nothing was.

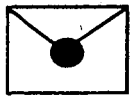
Not even death. ●

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to:



ELLERY QUEEN
P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625



For change of address, please advise 6 to 8 weeks before moving.
Send your current mailing label with new address.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Allen Davis

Shriving the Scarecrow

by Clayton Emery

"Help! Murder! Oh, help!" The cry sailed across the marsh, helpless as a rat in the claws of a hawk.

"There!" Marian pointed through the slanting sunset. "There's three of them!"

"No, two." Robin Hood flicked a hand over his shoulder, nocked a cloth-yard arrow to the bow always in his left hand.

The outlaws could see for miles. Romney Marsh stretched along the gray English Channel, ditched and dyked by Roman engineers, dead level. Their destination, a lonely church, jutted above the marsh like a crown on a tabletop. The village of Romney was a mile inland, tucked against trees thumb-high.

©1997 by Clayton Emery

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two men ran while one stood still. The first fled for the sanctuary of the church. A smaller man pursued, waving a knife that glistened gold. The third hung crucified on a tilting cross. Elongated shadows like giant spiders streamed from the feet of all three and converged.

Robin and Marian dashed down a dyke, vaulted a ditch, tore across a newly harvested field churned to mud by autumn rain. Shaggy white sheep bleated and scampered aside. Rye and barley stubble crunched under deerhide soles. Chaff stuck to their trouser legs.

But the outlaws were still half a mile off when the first man quit running for the church, staggered towards the third figure—not a man, but a ratty scarecrow. The man cowered in its pathetic shelter while the knife wielder slashed the air and ran straight on.

"You'll have to shoot," Marian panted.

Robin Hood nodded. Atop a dyke, he raised his great bow, drew a tight breath with the string, curled finger and thumb under his jaw . . .

The knife wielder chased his victim around the scarecrow, shoved it askew to stab . . .

"Rob . . ."

The mighty bow thrummed, the evening caught its breath, then a black shaft ripped through the scarecrow, slammed into the chest of the villain behind. He bowled over into the mud.

Again Robin and Marian ran, quartering dykes, threading packed sheep. Gulls and woodpigeons and skylarks, gleaning grain from the harvest, flapped away trilling and keening.

Treading on shadows, the outlaws circled the scarecrow. The rescued man sobbed on his knees. The stricken man lay on his back, Robin's arrow above his heart, eyes focused on Heaven.

He raised a quivering hand towards the scarecrow. "It was him. Him done it. Not me. Him."

Robin and Marian turned, confused.

The rescued man had gained his feet. "It's the—scarecrow. He thinks—the scarecrow's—killed him."

"Shrive me," whispered the dying man, "for God's mercy."

Marian bent, licked her finger, traced a cross on his forehead. "I absolve you of all sin. Rest in peace."

"It was him done it . . ." The voice trailed off. The arm fell.

"You've saved me," puffed the other. He was older, with a sparse salt-speckled beard and pouchy eyes. A merchant, by his red robe

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and ermine collar. "I can—pay. Bless you both. He'd have—killed me. I can pay . . ."

"Keep your money," Robin snapped. "Pay me in truth. Who is he and why did he pursue?"

The merchant waved a hand. "He's Rioch. A cutthroat—reprobate. Anyone—will tell you. My coin—is good. . . ."

"I said, keep your money!"

Marian laid a hand on Robin's arm. "But why did he pursue, good sir?"

"For my money, of course!" Sobbing for air, the man shook his head irritably. "I stepped outside to—see the sunset—and he jumped me. They'll tell you."

Robin looked black as he cut out the arrow with his large Irish knife. Marian frowned at the scarecrow. It was only a bag of burlap stuffed with straw, a worm-eaten purple-white turnip for a head, a tattered straw hat and rags too rotten to steal, though they had once been bright red brocade. The creature hung tilted on a rickety cross, head down as if witness to shameful secrets.

"Where the hell is everyone?" Robin squinted at the distant village. "You'd think a murder before their very eyes—There they come. But not many."

Closer now, silhouetted against dusk, they saw that west of the village stood a manor house seemingly uprooted from town. It was stone with flanking towers of wood in imitation of a castle, stables and outbuildings behind, bounded by a wooden fence. Serving women watched from the front gate while a pair of men trudged across the marsh. Romney village was twenty cottages and an alehouse but no chapel. A nearby mill, once worked by the tides, slouched brokenly; bats flitted out holes in the roof. Villagers, sharing ale and talk after a thirsty day's harvesting, gathered by sheep pens and stared, but only a man and boy plodded their way.

Marian crossed her arms as the channel wind hissed around them. Robin had wanted to show Marian this wondrous marsh, for he'd only seen it from the sea, and both wished to visit the nearby battlefield of Hastings, or Senelac as Saxons still named it. They were out for a lark before winter shut them in Sherwood Forest, but their holiday had come to an abrupt end. "Did you ever see anyplace so flat?"

"The deserts of Arabia. The open ocean. But not anyplace green." Robin wiped his bloody arrow on salt grass. "Must be the flatness gets into their minds."

Without a word, the red-robed merchant left them to the dead

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

man and drooping scarecrow. He picked across the marsh towards the manor.

The oncoming villager wore a black robe to his ankles, a cowl edged with white, a skullcap. The priest was old and stooped, but strong in body and spirit, and plodded on doggedly. The lad trailing must have been an altar boy.

The priest peered at the strangers. In tattered Lincoln green, tunics and boots of deerhide, hung with knives and quivers and satchels and blankets, they might have been king's foresters. Yet one was a woman with dark tumbling hair.

It being harvest time, beer was green, and the walk made the priest gurgle and erupt gas. He tried to be dignified, frowning at his smudged hems. "Pray forgive the blood. I've been butchering. I am Alaric DeFrier. So you've killed Rioch, eh? Just as well he's gone to God. I had to lock the poor box once he could walk, and the reeve wore out switches trying to make him farm. But it was the high road for him, with club and knife. Come, fetch him to the—church." He stifled a belch.

"Do you need help, Rob?"

"No." Testy, the archer stooped and levered the bloodless corpse to his shoulder. Free hand and bow wide for balance, he tottered across the marsh. The altar boy picked up Rioch's knife.

The church loomed large as a barn, built of brick and thick shingles, with a square tower for a steeple. Alaric explained, "A huge church for such a small village, yes. An archbishop fell into a ditch and prayed to Saint Thomas à Becket. He was rescued, and so built this magnificent church near where he fell. It's not even on the road, and a long way to walk for morning Mass. Yet someday I fear it may stand out of sight of any living soul."

Marian asked, "Why fear for the village's future?"

Alaric opened the wooden door, but paused to wave at the endless marsh. "We can grow crops, but not well. The land holds salt and floods often. Sheep prosper but not men, and sheep little need a church. This is more a place to grow legends than food. They say Britain is divided into five parts: England, Ireland, Wales, Scotland—and Romney Marsh."

The interior was dark. The floor was uneven stone, the only furniture a wooden altar and gilt cross. Alaric lit a rush and sent the boy into the nave to fetch a mat.

Robin eased the dead Rioch down. "How is it a merchant can be pursued across field and marsh and none run to his rescue?"

The priest accepted a bowl of seawater and a rag, knelt painfully

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to wash the corpse. Marian helped. "Vincent is not of this fief."

The outlaw pointed out the window at the manor house. "He lives here!"

A shake of the head. "Not really. He's from Rye." The seaport eight miles west.

"Surely," Robin objected, "he deserves succor from murdering villains with knives! Or does he?"

"'He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter,'" quoted the priest vaguely. "You may pass the night here if you wish. We've plenty of room."

Robin Hood took off his hat. "No, I think we'll bed in the forest. Father, can you shrive me?"

"Eh?" The priest squinted up, returned to ministering the body. "Ah, I see no need for absolution nor penance. It was clear Rioch intended murder."

"I feel guilty nonetheless." The archer gazed out the window. The marsh drew a line flat as the stone windowsill. "I've killed men before, God knows, but I don't feel right about this one."

Alaric rolled the corpse with gnarled hands. "It's tragic to lose any soul, but you are not culpable. I won't presume you were God's instrument, but . . . perhaps you'd best think it an accident and nothing more. You might pray for Rioch's soul. Precious few will."

Robin Hood suddenly donned his hat, thanked the priest with a silver penny, and marched out the door. Marian trailed him.

As they strode along the dykes above the alien marsh, the wife asked, "Why so glum, Rob? Withal that merchant seems not a goodly man, but the other was clearly a felon."

The outlaw shook his head. "I don't know that, Marian. I may have shot the wrong man . . ."

"Did you know," asked Marian, "to eat oysters on Saint James's Day means you'll never lack for money?"

"Not when I can steal it, no." Robin Hood winkled open an oyster with his knife, nicked the muscle, plopped white meat in his mouth.

Feet dangling, the two shucked oysters on a rickety pier. Rye was hilly as Romney Marsh was flat. Twin ridges like a swallow's tail projected into the sea. Each ridge was capped with sandstone and the sister towns of Rye and Winchelsea. Rye was notched into stone, girded by a city wall, and bound by three rivers: Rother, Brede, and Tillingham. All three carrying silt and sewage, they had choked Rye Bay into a long canal. Far out bobbed fat-bellied carracks and fishing boats, sails furled. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

channel beyond darkened as the sun set.

Up at dawn, the outlaws had entered by the Postern Gate and spent the day in town. Now Marian reported, "I asked all up and down Mermaid Street. They say the locals are aloof, but I dropped coins and folks were glad to gossip about someone they hate. Yes, Vincent's a burgher, a merchant."

"Beholden only to God," Robin muttered. Independent merchants were something new in England. Outside "God's Sacred Triangle" of peasants, clergy, and noblemen, they were a whole separate class just feeling their oats.

"Vincent began as a *velbrugger*, a dealer in sheepskins. Then he found a demand for corn† in Bruges' *Grote Markt*. Now, a viscount named Spencer is the feudal lord of Romney Marsh, but he's always campaigning in France with King Richard, so he's always strapped. So Spencer sells the entire wool and corn crop to Vincent *for cash* and it's all exported to Holland!"

"That explains why the mill falls down," Robin snuffed. "And why the priest fears the village will disappear."

"The poor peasants shear and harvest, then truck it all here to be sold to foreigners. They get silver instead of a share, but they must buy back wool and corn at higher prices, or else it's not available. And there's more. By law, the peasants keep the dykes and ditches in good heart. Vincent gains but contributes nothing, pays almost nothing in taxes. And rather than attend muster-at-arms, he pays deputies to go in his stead."

"A shield of gold." Robin shucked and nodded. "He's become virtual lord of the land, but with no oath of fealty between lord and peasant. No good will come of this mercantile class, I tell you."

"Aye. God and custom fall by the wayside, and money covers their altar."

Robin pitched oyster shells to fleabitten cats. Gulls flew off to peck at a skinned horse floating by. "I see why the peasants didn't rush to his aid. They've love for neither Vincent nor Rioch. But he employs two hundred men, I found. He owns three of those carracks to ship his grain, and the wharves to tie to, including this one we sit on."

"No one loves him. These merchants are more a brotherhood than rivals, because they depend on each other's honesty. But Vincent cuts too fine a bargain and won't make up for errors. When his wife died a few years ago, he built that grand house at Romney and moved. Some say it's to oversee harvests, but others say he

† Here a general term for grain: rye, wheat, barley, etc.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

evades taxes and guild restrictions, or else it's because everyone in Rye hates him so. The only one's ever profited by him is that scarecrow, who wears his cast-off clothing to protect his crops."

"So much for the true worth of money. A wife dead, children estranged, no friends. Even his partner's dead—"

"Aha!" beamed his wife.

Robin Hood hung on her pause. "Keep talking. He didn't die in bed, did he?"

"No," Marian trumpeted, "he was stabbed! In his counting house one night! The murderer was never found, nor the money recovered! Vincent inherited his half of the three ships!"

"Lucky Vincent," mused Robin, "but then, he's got seven letters in his name—get up!"

Heavy boots clomped fast along the pier. Out of the shadows ran two men, fishermen or sailors in pitch-smeared shirts and knit caps. Each carried a gaff, an oak club topped with a shark hook. The gaffs went up as one rumbled, "You're to get out of town and stay out!"

Robin and Marian glided across the pier. Marian balanced her slim bow in one hand, drew her Irish knife with the other. Robin Hood only flexed his grip. The sailors paused as their intended victims, rather than cringe, took up fighting stances. But with roars to encourage themselves, they rushed.

Marian flashed her knife in a circle: a ruse. As the sailor's eyes flicked to the blade, the Vixen of Sherwood lunged. The tip of her bow tagged the charging brute below the Adam's apple. Gagging, he slammed to a stop. Marian tangled his legs with her bow and toppled him off the pier.

Robin Hood shouted, jabbed the bow at his opponent, snagged the fishhook instead, yanked the gaff to one side. Off balance, unwilling to let go, the sailor lurched. Robin's knotty fist crashed alongside his head and almost snapped his neck. When he hit the pier with his face, the outlaw trod on both hands to cripple him.

Flushed, Marian peered at the water. "Mine might drown."

"A fisherman to feed the fish, eh? That closes a neat circle." Robin blew on his fist and grinned. "I like how your bosom heaves when you're excited."

Marian pointed her bow. "There's more room in the bay, so curb your tongue."

Smirking, Robin knelt on the sailor's back to yell in his ear. "Hoy, can you hear? Don't squirm or I'll slice your ear off and shout into that! You're lucky you assaulted me and not the iron maiden

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

there! Talk! Who put you up to this? Or do I know already?"

Dizzy from the blow, a ringing skull, and daft dialogue, the sailor pretended not to understand.

"Ken this!" Robin waggled his Irish knife before one eye, a silver crown before the other. "Which will you have?"

The man's eyes fixed on the coin. "It was the corn merchant, Vincent, told us to chivvy you out of town."

Straightening, Robin dropped the coin on the wharf, watched the sailor grope for it. "It'll wait. Fish out your friend first." He kicked the sailor in the belly off the pier.

Marian pouted impishly. "'Iron maiden'?"

Robin grinned. "Interesting that Vincent hires brigands for dirty deeds. Men work by habit: if he's done it once, he's done it before . . . Marian, did you ever hear the legend of Romney Marsh, how an offended scarecrow stalks the night for revenge?"

Marian puckered her dark brows. "Never."

"You will."

Vincent parted bed curtains of heavy silk from Baghdad called baldachin. Naked, hairy, and paunchy, he fumbled for a robe of green-blue samite. The room was dark except for chinks of light through heavy shutters.

He squinted, froze, thrust his thumbs between his first two fingers, the fig sign to ward off evil.

In a shaft of sunlight, a rat stood on two legs and wiggled its nose at him.

Vincent shouted for the cook, who was supposed to poison the rats in the galley, and for the farrier to kill the beast. But as he snatched up his robe, something dropped with a soft plop. Another rat.

His shouts choked off. The solar, his bedchamber, crawled with rats. Two dozen or more. Mostly they sniffed and scrabbled at the closed door to the stairwell, but others slunk under his bed or scurried along the windowsill.

Howling, the naked merchant yanked the door open, scattering a dozen gray creatures, and plunged through the doorway.

He slipped on something wet at the head of the stairs. Flailing, he grabbed for the bannister, but it too was slick. Sliding, he tumbled end-over-end down the stairs and crashed at the bottom.

The major-domo came running, the cook and skivvies from the kitchen, the farrier and stable boy from outside. All gasped and prayed, the boy crossing his fingers. No one helped Vincent rise.

Thrashing, swearing, bruised and battered, the merchant

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

groped for purchase, but his hands were tacky. All of him was streaked red. With blood.

Rats spilled down the stairs and the women shrieked. Vincent bawled at the farrier to fetch a shovel—

—But again his cries choked off. The stable boy had left the front door open. Past the dying garden and low fence, Vincent saw endless marsh and fields stripped of his grain.

A quarter mile off stood the scarecrow in Vincent's cast-off rags. Not near the distant church, as two days ago, but closer by most of a mile.

As if the crucified creation had stalked towards the house.

Back in the low forest, Robin Hood pinched salt over spitted rabbits. "Almost done."

Marian returned from the edge of the woods. "I saw the farrier run into the house, thought I heard shouts. Vincent's discovered our handiwork."

"Not our handiwork," Robin smacked his lips, "the scarecrow's."

"Whoever's. I hope his household isn't dismissed right away."

"No. He'll keep them on, else he'd have to work himself. And when they are chucked out, we'll give 'em enough coin to start elsewhere." Approached last evening, the cook had admitted the female servants hated Vincent's parsimony and crude demands. Paid in silver, they'd gladly colluded. As the boys and girls of Rye had happily caught wharf rats for a ha'penny each.

"Will he know the blood is from rabbits, do you think?"

"If he tastes it." Robin was especially proud of the rabbits, which he'd bowled over with headless arrows as they nibbled grain. "But I imagine Vincent's appetite will be short this morn. Not like mine. Eat up! Rabbit flesh gives you speed, such as outlaws need."

He slid a roasted rabbit onto a slab of bark, dabbed on fresh-ground mustard seed. Marian wiped a knife on her trouser leg. "You know, we're not certain he's guilty of anything."

"He's guilty of siccing those sailors on us—on you. Assaulting the woman I love, he's brought more trouble on himself than Satan can visit in an eternity."

Marian smiled. "So what's next, O limb of Satan?"

Robin scanned the red-orange oaks overhead. "How do you weave those loveknots girls make in springtime?"

Vincent had slept badly, but finally dozed off, when a sharp *caw!* woke him.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He didn't throw the curtains aside, but only peeked. His head throbbed, for he'd drunk a goodly portion of brandy to nod off. Now he felt sick, for the bedchamber stank of guano, as if geese had paraded through.

Not geese, but crows. By cracks of daylight he saw two, four, a dozen sleek black shapes strut and flap and hop around his solar. One's *caw* set the others to raucous chorus.

Vincent shoved out of bed. He didn't fear crows. But his feet scrunched in something that pricked his soles. Straw covered the floor ankle deep. He stared. It was impossible.

Shooing crows, he scuffed to the door. He'd wedged the bar with a piece of cordwood, hammering it tight, and it was still stuck. He crossed to the front window, fumbled the shutter open, shouted, and flapped naked arms. The crows burst outside like a black snowstorm.

But Vincent stayed at the window, thunderstruck.

The scarecrow had traversed the marsh. It stood just at the fence, as if ready to mount into his yard.

Back in the treeline, Robin and Marian were invisible in faded green and deerhide. The King of Sherwood nodded as crows fluttered upwards.

"Do you think he's worried?" Marian asked.

"Wouldn't you be?"

"You're devious. Worse than Will Scarlett once a scheme takes hold."

"Will's my cousin. Mayhaps what he channels to mischief I turn to justice." Robin nodded again, smug. He'd given up weaving a net as taking too long. Instead he'd stolen a fisherman's net, propped it on poles, and baited the trap with barley. Having caught crows, he'd mounted a ladder to Vincent's window and winkled the shutter bar up with a knife point. He'd pitched in straw and then the crows, then hurried back to the woods.

Cradling her bow, Marian leaned against a tree. "What next?"

"Return the net, then watch Vincent. He'll be calling on help soon, or I miss my guess."

"Help from God or man?"

"Knowing him, probably both. But neither can help. That's the beauty of it."

Marian rolled her eyes. "I'm glad I'm not your enemy."

Robin grinned and kissed her. "No one could be your enemy."

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dressed in his finest robe and riding his best horse, Vincent sought the priest.

Alaric worked with others at slaughtering and salting. The priest had tucked up his black robe and donned a linen smock crusted with blood. He sliced the organs from a pig hung by the ankles. The pig was black and white and smeared with red, same as the priest.

Alaric handed his knife to a goodwife when Vincent asked to speak alone. The two moved to where the frightened squeals of corralled pigs covered their words.

"Father," Vincent looked at the ground, "I would confess."

"You should," Alaric snapped. "I expected you long before this. As has God. But to confess, you must unburden yourself of everything. Everything."

Muzzy from two nights' broken sleep, Vincent shook his head. "I don't understand. I can pay . . ."

"You cannot," Alaric rapped. He wiped pig's blood from a hairy ear. "You are crippled with sin, Vincent, but I see by your eyes you still would prevaricate. To celebrate reconciliation, you must tell all and leave nothing out. There are no half-measures with God."

The merchant piffed. "If you'll not shrive me, I'll go to Rye! Saint Mary the Virgin's is there—"

"Go to Rome if you wish," Alaric spat. "A pilgrimage would do you good. Or build a cathedral. No matter what bargain you strike with men, God is the judge, who sees and knows all."

"I will be shriven!" Vincent yelled, and the village heard the shrill of pigs. "I will have my way!"

"You'll walk a lonely road. Until you confess, on your knees before the altar of God, you are barred from Mass, from Communion, from all absolution, here and in Rye, even if your sins rot your very core." Alaric sniffed and returned to his butchery.

Raging, shaken, and haunted, Vincent kicked his horse towards his manor. He went inside only a moment, then returned outdoors with an ash shovel. Reaching across the fence with a long shaking arm, he tipped live coals into the scarecrow's rags and straw. Fanned by the channel breeze, the scarecrow burned, the flames rippling like shallow water.

"You won't get me," Vincent croaked like a death rattle. "You won't!"

Marian returned to their camp, which was wreathed in gold leaves above and below. "Burning a cross brings seven years' bad luck."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Robin Hood nodded where he rested against a rock. "He won't last that long. But he might be visited by seven plagues, if I can think of a few more. I'll hike to Rye. You visit the priest, discreetly, and see what Vincent had to say."

"You're having fun, aren't you?"

"I'm not having fun. This is work." But he grinned as he caught up his bow.

Vincent addressed eight hard-bitten souls in his grand hall. Sailors, they feared neither men nor God, only the wrath of the sea.

"There's just us here now. I've thrown the servants out. I know they bargained with my enemies. Now listen close or you'll not be paid. You're to stay inside the house, one at each window and door, and not sleep, and wake me if anything untoward happens. Do you understand?" They did, and hefted clubs and knives to demonstrate.

Still, Vincent was uneasy as he climbed to his solar and double-checked the shutters and door wedges. He didn't disrobe, but lay clothed on his curtained bed. He hugged a brandy crock tight, and only nodded off when it was drained dry.

A crash against shutters woke him.

Clambering up, holding his pounding skull, half-suffocated in the foul room, Vincent stumbled to the shutters. They were locked tight. Yet he jumped as again something rapped from outside. Opening a crack showed nothing, for it was black night.

Lighting a candle, he found his bedchamber untrammeled. The floor was bare. Only partly relieved, he listened at the door. And heard a peculiar grunting.

Snores, he thought. Those worthless sailors had nodded off. Cursing, he used a hammer to bang the wedges out, ripped open the door. He'd pitch them out too and pay nothing—

An eyewatering reek turned his stomach sour. The grunting was loud, inhuman.

Making sure the stairs were clear, Vincent tiptoed down in bare feet. No lights showed below: The tallow lamps were extinguished. He waved his feeble candle.

Pigs, spotted black and white, had invaded his house. At the strange light, they squealed and scampered, cloven feet skidding on wooden floors. Their blundering knocked rolling objects big as a man's head. Squinting, Vincent found them to be purple-white turnips, dozens of them. Same as the scarecrow's head.

From the foot of the stairs, candle aloft, Vincent tentatively

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

called his sailors. None answered. Unsure if he were awake or in the throes of nightmare, Vincent picked through his mucky house. It was only him and the pigs. How . . . ?

The scarecrow, he thought suddenly. Where was it? If the pigs got in, so could the scarecrow. It could be in here—

He had to get out. Panicking, dropping the candle, he jerked up the bar, flung open the double doors—

—and faced the scarecrow.

Etched against the night, Vincent saw straw jutting from rents, the blank burlap face looming, his own red rags twisting. Clutched in a crooked hand was a wicked scythe like that carried by Death himself.

"No! I burned you!" Vincent staggered back from the apparition, tripped on a turnip, fell sprawling. Scrambling up, he dashed for the back door, threw the bar aside, flung it open to—

—another scarecrow, with a pitchfork. God's pity, how many were there?

The phantom raised a rag-hung finger. A voice harsh as a crow's rasped, "Confess! It's the only thing to save you! Confess!"

With a howl like a trapped animal, the merchant whirled again. But the first scarecrow stalked into the hall, the great curved scythe bobbing at each step. "Confess!" it shrilled.

Stunned, Vincent covered his face and collapsed. Turnips thumped against his knees and soles as the scarecrows closed in. "Confess, Vincent! Confess and end this nightmare! Confess!"

"All right, all right!" the beaten man blubbered. "I had Rioch kill my partner! I told him where, at the counting house! Gave him the key! Oh, help me, Lord!"

The taller scarecrow turned, called, "You heard?"

Alaric the priest came from the shadows of the barnyard. The village reeve and a few others followed. "Aye, we heard."

The scarecrow grabbed at his head, pulled it off. The smaller one dropped the scythe, dragged off an itchy mask. Marian's black hair was speckled with straw. "Are you smug now, Robin?"

The outlaw let go a sigh. "Not as smug as I reckoned to be. But justice is served, and the souls of two men will lie easy. That's the best we can hope for."

Come morning, Robin hefted the scarecrow disguises and a new cross and strode across the marsh. Marian followed with the priest. Robin talked as he replanted the cross.

"It was lucky we found these rags. I had to scour Rye to match

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the ones Vincent burned." He impaled the burlap sack on the upright. "You know, the only clue I had was that Vincent sicced two sailors on us in Rye. That seemed greatly vindictive when all we'd done was ask questions. Left alone, Marian and I would have probably walked clear out of his life. But the guilty see where none pursueth, or some such."

The outlaw stuffed straw into the body. "After that attack, I knew more about Vincent: that he'd hire brigands for criminal acts. (Same as he hired sailors to guard his house last night. Ha! For a handful of silver they opened the door and left, just as did Judas.) But it made sense. Vincent was a robber in his own way, cutting deals so fine he drew blood from rivals. And who else was a criminal? Rioch!"

"So, some guessing." Robin speared a turnip on the cross with a sickening *chuk!* "Vincent is the richest man hereabouts, so a natural target for Rioch. What if one night Rioch came to rob Vincent, and instead was bribed to kill Vincent's partner, to stab him to death in his counting house? That would be two thieves getting cozy, both profiting. Eventually, of course, the two thieves fell out, over money, no doubt. Rioch chased Vincent with a knife; I shot Rioch. In dying, his vision failed, so he pointed not at Vincent, but at the scarecrow in Vincent's cast-off clothing, saying, 'He did it.' But we misunderstood, and with Rioch died their secret bond. And any way to prove Vincent's crime unless he confessed."

Robin fussed with red rags. "So I, working through others—the scarecrow, rats, pigs, crows—much like Vincent, set out to make him confess. If he were innocent, as Marian reminded me, he'd only suffer a scare, which would make us quits for the sailor attack. But if he were guilty—and he was, so that's that." He tipped a hat rakishly and nodded.

"But why take such interest?" asked Alaric. "Why all this trouble? What was Rioch or Vincent to you?"

"Oh, nothing." Robin Hood stepped back to admire his work. "But I worried I'd shot the wrong man. I wanted to be shriven, as Rioch had been, by Marian's hand. I was absolved by Vincent's confession. That left only the scarecrow, for it had also been accused. Now it's shriven too."

"What?" The priest cocked his head as if his old ears betrayed him. "It's what?"

With a fingertip, Robin tilted the cross straight. "Remember, to offend a scarecrow offends another, who also hung on a cross to guard over us. . . ."●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Shades of Gray

by Donald Olson

In her sixty-plus years Flora Croft had acquired a certain instinct, keen as the human instinct for survival, that told her when circumstances were right and warned her when they were not, and when that inner alarm sounded she'd learned not to take chances. Like a soldier scouting enemy troop movements she was alert to the danger signals: a furtive movement behind the coat-racks, the seemingly coincidental reappearance of the same "shopper," the telltale scrutiny of a pair of eyes that said watch out, they're on to you. Then she would assume her vague, dithery smile, hold her head high, and make a strategic withdrawal.

Flora's appearance was in her favor; she was the image of respectability and genteel poverty. A chunky little woman, she carried herself with an air of modest dignity, wore her ancient Persian lamb coat as if it were still the height of fashion, never ventured out without her gloves, or the knitted blue pillbox hat perched regally upon hair that was in the transitional stage from gray to white. Her body still possessed a vigor that could deny its age, and when the adrenaline was flowing during her shopping trips she did in fact feel ten years younger than when sitting alone at home measuring the hours by the various TV programs to which she was addicted, or had been until her set left the house and never came back.

The word "shopping" is of course a misnomer, for her periodic forays into the glittering vast bazaar of the Millbrook Mall were more in the nature of raids upon enemy territory.

Flora could never have afforded to shop in such places.

Nor did she, for what it is worth in the credit column, ever shop for herself. No, she shopped for the children in her neighborhood, a poor neighborhood if not a ghetto, the word Flora laughingly used when she had occasion to tell strangers where she lived, and there were literally hordes of children on Jubilee Street.

Regardless of size or color or any other characteristic, each of the male children reminded her of little Dickie.

©1977 by Donald Olson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mercantile surveillance being what it is nowadays, it goes without saying there'd been embarrassing incidents, even the modest fine or two, but like many victims in bondage to other forms of addiction Flora knew in her heart that only some momentous event would ever free her from the compulsion to shoplift.

Such an event did finally occur on a windy, rain-spattery March day when the oppressive gloom of her little house on Jubilee Street drove her to don her Persian lamb coat and the knitted blue pillbox hat and venture forth in her rusty old VW bug, intent upon picking up that pair of athletic shoes for the little Galloway boy, one of her particular favorites. He had the same curly blond hair as little Dickie.

The shoes were on sale (as if it mattered) in Steinway's, one of the mall's bigger department stores, a place Flora had avoided for months following a slight unpleasantness which had happily ended with the security people accepting her story of having "forgotten" to pay for the track suit she'd picked up for her "grandson." Only the most case-hardened functionary could withstand the appeal of Flora's dithery smile and twinkling blue eyes.

Practiced in the various "tricks of the trade," as she called them, to foil the equally artful tactics of the Enemy, Flora soon felt the weight of the trainers in her bag and unhurriedly made her way to the store's exit into the mall parking lot. Beyond the doors a chartered bus, parked in what Flora called "no man's land," that space between the exit and where she'd left her car, was disgorging a stream of senior citizens on a shopping tour. As the group advanced upon Flora and two or three other departing shoppers she hastened her steps, her car being out of sight behind the bus.

Suddenly, with safety only a few yards away, she heard a shrill voice cry out, "Stop! Hold it right there!"

One of Flora's rules was *Never look back.* Keep walking. Don't act guilty. Now, however, as she ducked in front of the bus, she ventured a hasty glance behind her. A uniformed guard was pushing his way through the group of elderly shoppers and heading straight toward her. She was dimly aware of a scuffle and suddenly the guard was not there and a firm hand, gripping her elbow, was helping her, almost bundling her, into the car.

Flora always left her key in the ignition while she was in the mall, a risk she was prepared to take in the interest of making a fast getaway should one be necessary. Clearly, one was necessary

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

now and Flora was not one to panic in a crisis. The car shot forward and sped toward the parking lot exit into Wembly Boulevard. The adrenaline was pumping madly. Not a word passed between Flora and her passenger while all this was happening; only when she was tooling down the boulevard did she chance a glance to her side.

Her first impression was that the young man beside her had the face of an angel; that is to say, he was fair-skinned and light-haired, with high cheekbones and a broad mouth.

"Oh, what a scare!" she cried, a little giddy now that the moment of high drama had passed. "Another minute and he'd have had me in his clutches. Was it you knocked him down? Oh dear, what if he got my license number?"

She was aware of the young man watching her with a look of quizzical amusement. "I doubt it," he said. "The bus was in the way. You live far?"

"Jubilee Street. Not far. Five minutes."

"You have a garage?"

"Yes."

"Sooner you get this bug under cover the better. Just in case."

"But what about you? Where—"

"I'll bet you brew a dynamite cup of tea. I could sure use one."

The promise of a more domestic adventure was quite to Flora's liking. "I think it's the least you deserve. My name, by the way, is Flora Croft."

"Derek Callender."

Pity his name wasn't Dickie, she thought. With those blond curls and blue eyes he might have been little Dickie, all grown up.

Tea in the parlor as dusk was falling. Flora had taken time to whisk some muffins in the oven while Derek was taking a shower, which Flora had insisted he was more than welcome to do. "Who knows?" she'd said. "If it weren't for you, I might be in some horrible filthy jail cell right now."

Later, pouring the tea, she said, "I don't do it for myself, you know. I've never taken a single solitary item for myself. It's for the children, you see. This is a very poor neighborhood. Such lovable, ragtag little urchins. The shoes are for the Galloway boy."

Derek Callender drank his tea and ate his muffins without taking his eyes from Flora's face. "You mean you make a habit of doing this? A nice little old lady like you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I always ask myself, why do I do it? Guess if I knew the answer maybe I wouldn't."

Derek asked her if some sort of charity work wouldn't be safer, to which she replied that in a manner of speaking that's what it was. Fitting him easily into the role of understanding stranger, Flora thought how wonderful it felt to be able to *talk* about it.

"I'll tell you how it all began. After my hubby died I became ill—this was years ago—a severe nervous breakdown. We'd had one child, a little boy, Richard. I'll spare you the sordid details but I was obliged to give him up. It broke my heart but I had no choice in the matter. I was sick. No money. No one to help. The folks who adopted him took him out of the state. In time I regained my health pretty much. I was able to take on cleaning jobs. Somehow I managed to hang on to this little old house. Then one day, this was a couple of years ago, I was in a store and I saw this adorable little playsuit sewn with teddy bears and I thought how perfect it would have been for little Dickie. I stole it. After that, whenever I was feeling blue, which was most of the time, I'd pick up some little thing for Dickie, a toy, clothing, whatever. And then I started giving them away to youngsters around the neighborhood. They all call me Auntie Flora. I suppose you think I'm awful wicked."

Derek smiled. "If I did I wouldn't've stopped that mean old guard from collaring you, now would I?"

"But how did you know he was after *me?*"

"I saw you boost the shoes."

"You didn't!" She thought back, trying to recall if she'd seen him in Steinway's.

"Said to myself, this little lady's heading for trouble. Better keep an eye on her."

"My guardian angel."

"Wrong. I ain't no angel."

"So tell me about yourself. Tell me *everything."* Flora knew she was doing it again, what she called "making magic," a form of daydreaming where she'd imagine various situations in which little Dickie returned home to a joyful reunion, never again to leave, although never before had there been a living, breathing image to hang her fantasies upon, and what a warm, delicious thrill it gave her.

"Not much to tell," he replied, and what there was took only a few minutes. Derek told of bumming around the country for the past three years. He'd been in the merchant marines. He'd tried

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

all sorts of jobs without seeming able to settle down to one thing.

"You meet lots of interesting people, of course," he said. "Just last week I met this lady over in Cloverdale who hired me to rake up last year's leaves. She gave me ten bucks and this sweater."

Flora admired the sweater, a pale blue cable-knit, soiled but obviously expensive.

"I'll pop it in the wash," said Flora. "It'll be good as new."

"I can't let you do that."

"Why not? My stars, look what you've done for me. Oh, please. Stay the night at least. Up in Richard's room. It'll be such fun having a guest. I've never had a guest. I won't know how to behave." She looked toward the door. "If someone got my license number the police would have come by now, don't you think?"

"Most likely."

Seconds later she gave a little start as the doorbell did indeed ring. Flora rushed to the window and peeped around the curtain, then relaxed with a tinkling laugh.

"It's only Mrs. Galloway. You stay put."

Voices in the hall and then Flora returning with a young woman in jeans; a careworn face, pale red hair in a ponytail.

"This is Richard," said Flora proudly. "I told you about Richard, remember?"

The woman stared at Derek. "Not little Dickie."

Flora beamed. "Guess I can't call him little Dickie anymore, can I? He's come home for a visit. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Great, yeah."

"He tracked me down after all these years."

Flora ran to pick up the trainers still lying where she'd flung them on the sofa. "I hope they're the right size. A special sale, so I can't return them."

A smile lightened Mrs. Galloway's sallow face. "Perfect, I'm sure. But you shouldn't have bought such expensive ones."

"I know how hard boys are on shoes. Cup of tea, dear?"

"Thanks, no. Timmy's watching the baby."

Soon as the door closed Flora turned to Derek with a whimsical, contrite smile. "I hope you didn't mind my telling that little fib. It just popped out."

Derek's broad grin carved dimples in his cheeks. Enchanting. Just like little Dickie's.

For dinner there was leftover meatloaf, baked potatoes, and glazed carrots, served by candlelight, something Flora hadn't done

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in years. Afterwards, Derek insisted on helping clear up. Flora washed; he wiped. She relished the feeling of warm coziness and deep contentment. It really was as if little Dickie had come home.

Later, Flora brought out the cards. All she'd been able to play for years was solitaire. Derek taught her a game called Spades; the evening seemed to flash by.

"Isn't it amazing," she said. "I just this minute realized something. This is the first time in ages I've felt really, truly safe. Here in the house, I mean, the neighborhood gone to seed like it has. I used to be such a trusting person, until a few months ago. My old TV set went on the blink and I just never seemed to have the money to get it fixed. I really miss it. Then one day I look out and see these two men carrying a TV set out of the house next door. I ran out on the porch and called to them. 'Yoo-hoo,' I said, 'do you fix TV's?' The one man grinned and said, 'We sure do, lady.' I asked him to look at mine. They said sure they could fix it but they'd have to take it to the shop. Said it wouldn't cost an arm and a leg either. One of them spots Mother's silver tea set on the sideboard. 'Give us that,' he says, 'and it won't cost you a dime.' So I did. Well, would you believe it? They were thieves! They were *stealing* that TV set from next door. In broad daylight! Don't people do the most awful things nowadays?"

The long, considering smile Derek gave her made her blush like a girl. "Oh, I know what you're thinking," she said. "I'm hardly the one to talk, am I?"

"I wasn't thinking that at all."

"Well, look at it this way," she said eagerly, full of the need to talk, to explain, perhaps even to apologize, as if it were Richard she wished to make understand. "Things aren't all black and white, are they? There's even shades of gray. Way I see it, there's a difference between wickedness and evil. I may have my wicked little quirks, sure I do, but I'm not an *evil* person. I wouldn't dream of stealing a poor widow lady's TV set, and her silver tea service to boot. A person would have to be truly evil to pull a stunt like that, don't you agree? I may occasionally have taking ways, so to speak, but I never have taken anything for myself. Though I don't suppose God would think that argument held even a drop of water."

"I guess only God knows what God thinks," Derek said. "I only know what I think. I think it's time you found a safer way to get your jollies."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Flora slept fitfully that night, so many thoughts scampering through her brain, yet she felt a singular ease of mind, a sense of comfort in knowing she was not alone in the house, and when at last she fell into a deeper sleep her mind was still making magic, pretending it was indeed Richard lying in the room across the hall.

When morning came Derek said he would eat breakfast and then hit the road.

Flora felt a plunging sense of loss. "But where will you go?"

"Back where I come from, I guess."

"Where was that?"

"Nowhere, really."

"And where might that be on the map of the universe?" she asked. "Best you stay here a bit longer."

"No can do. Last thing you need is a star boarder."

"But you can help me. So many things need doing. Little repairs and paint jobs and drippy faucets. Oh, do stay, Derek, just for a few more days."

Derek relented, and the morning was spent inspecting all the little jobs that needed doing around the house, starting with the dripping faucets, which Derek proved to have a deft hand in fixing. Then there were touch-up jobs using dibs and dabs of leftover paint, and patching the scarred and damp-faded spots on the walls with miscellaneous rolls of ancient wallpaper which didn't always match the existing patterns; economy had to prevail, and even if she'd had the money Flora wouldn't have dared take the car out of the garage for fear it might be recognized—even if the police had evidently not been given the license number.

While rummaging in the tiny attic for those rolls of wallpaper Derek had narrowly missed upsetting an old table lamp perched on a rickety table stripped of most of its veneer. The lamp had a slim metal base and a glass shade.

"Where'd this come from?" asked Derek, finger-brushing away the dust from the shade to reveal a painted scene of an orange-colored sunset above a woodland lake.

"Wedding present to Mother," said Flora, "or I'd have slung it out long ago."

That evening Derek announced he'd be leaving in the morning. Flora looked at him in dismay. "But you said you'd stay. At least for a few more days."

Derek shook his head. "Wouldn't work out, Flora. But don't think I don't appreciate the invite."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You won't change your mind? You could find a job, live up in Richard's room."

"I can change my mind but not my feet. They get this awful burning itch if I stay too long in one place."

"But I'll *miss* you." Like losing little Dickie all over again. "My evenings will be endless. Not even a TV to keep me company."

Derek's gaze traveled about the room as if storing up its details in his memory. "Stay here," he said. "Be right back."

Up the stairs he went and when he came down he was carrying that old relic of a lamp with its painted glass shade. Placing it on the dining room table he fetched a dishrag from the kitchen and carefully cleaned away the layers of dust and grime while Flora watched with a bemused expression.

"Now see here," he said. "What's it say on this band?"

Beneath his fingertip Flora made out the word *Jefferson* inscribed on the narrow brass rim atop the glass shade. "What about it?" she asked.

"I worked for a spell with a guy in the antique trade. Used to haul for him. Down south, out west. Learned a bit about the business. I can't tell you exactly what a Jefferson lamp's worth today but I'd wager it'd be enough to buy yourself a real fine TV set."

"That ugly old lamp? Now you're making fun of me."

"Trust me. You know any antique dealers in town?"

"There's Cardell's over in the West End Arcade."

"Good. Tomorrow morning I'm taking this lamp over there, see what I can get for it. If that's okay with you."

Flora would have agreed to anything if it would delay Derek's departure for only a few hours. "You do that," she said, "but don't be surprised if the bulbs are worth more than the lamp. Folks don't go for that sort of monstrosity anymore."

"You'd be surprised."

Refusing to let Flora drive him, Derek wrapped the lamp and shade in plastic bags and getting directions from Flora, set off to walk uptown to the arcade wearing a shabby old raincoat and hat which had belonged to the long-dead Arthur Croft. This was at ten o'clock in the morning. Flora busied herself dusting the furniture and preparing a tuna casserole for their lunch, wishing there were some way she could talk Derek into staying. Already, as if a death had occurred, the house had acquired its old familiar atmosphere of silent desolation.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

By noon he was still not back. Flora left the casserole on top of the range and went out on the porch to stand gazing up the street, expecting any minute to see Derek's tall figure emerging out of the thickening mist. An hour passed and then another. As the afternoon waned and shadows of dusk crept into the dingy front room Flora's heart grew heavier by the minute until finally she forced herself to accept the fact that Derek was never coming back. It was like the TV "repairmen" all over again. Now that she thought about it, Derek hadn't firmly made up his mind to leave until after he'd spotted that old lamp in the attic.

She warmed up the casserole and, despite her lack of appetite, tried to swallow a few nibbles. No fool like an old fool, she told herself, yet she bore no grudge against Derek. More power to him if he succeeded in getting a few bucks for that old lamp. She was still in his debt. Hadn't he saved her from what might have been the most humiliating experience in her life?

After clearing the table she climbed the stairs to Richard's room, sat down on the bed, and clutched to her breast a tattered brown teddy bear, the one memento of little Dickie she'd never dream of giving away. Without actually formulating the resolve she knew the neighborhood children would be receiving no more handouts from Auntie Flora. Derek was right. It was high time she found some other way to get her jollies.

Midmorning of the following day a white van pulled into the driveway bearing the logo of a well-known appliance dealer. No mistake, the driver assured Flora. His instructions were to deliver the TV set to Mrs. Flora Croft at that address. Installation included.

Flora didn't stir from in front of the set for the rest of that morning, and when the local newscast came on at noon the sight of the newscaster's face was like meeting an old friend after a long absence. It was the usual bad news, of course, from which Flora felt comfortably remote. She got up to put the teakettle on, missing the final item on the broadcast:

Police still report no leads on the attempted holdup of the Millbrook Mall branch of the First National Bank Thursday afternoon. The young would-be robber, apparently unarmed, fled from the bank after a teller sounded the alarm. Bystanders reported he escaped in a small gray car with a possible accomplice after assaulting a bank security guard who tried to apprehend him. Now for the weather . . . ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GERTRUDE

by Ann Bayer

My wife always wanted to be a lemur. I don't know why this should be so. The only place lemurs occur in the wild is Madagascar, and I used to say to her, "Gert, give me one good reason why living in a tree in Madagascar is preferable to living in a house in Cleveland." I never got a satisfactory answer. It's something she can't explain. By some evolutionary quirk of fate, Gertrude seems to have been born with the body and mind of a human being but the heart and soul of the pre-monkey suborder, *Lemuroidea*. The British writer Cyril Connolly wrote that when he thought of lemurs, depression engulfed him. On my wife these purple-tongued entities have a different effect. When she thinks of them she's engulfed by a delusion of grandeur. Their grandeur, her delusion.

Ann Bayer is a veteran of *EQMM* with several pieces published in the eighties and early nineties and a second-place Readers Award win in 1987. Ms. Bayer worked for some years as a staff writer for *Life* magazine, and her fiction has appeared in many other distinguished publications, including *Harper's, The Saturday Evening Post, Mademoiselle* and *Seventeen*.

I met Gertrude when I led a group of Clevelanders on an expedition to Madagascar. At the time I was still curator of physical anthropology at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. Gertrude was head of the English department at a private school for girls. It wasn't until after we were married that she confided that her secret wish was to be a lemur.

At first this didn't seem to me all that unreasonable. Nearly two hundred million years ago the mini-continent of Madagascar broke off from Africa and drifted eastward to its present position in the Indian Ocean. Finding itself stranded, a small squirrel-like mammal, our mutual progenitor, took a Darwinian detour and evolved

©1997 by Ann Boyer

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

into the lemur. It was not as if my wife wanted to be a dog or a cat. Lemurs are the flip side of us.

I asked Gertrude which of the forty or so types she wished she was. I started to name them. The red-bellied lemur, the broad-nosed gentle lemur, the fat-tailed dwarf lemur . . . But no. It turned out the lemur she most wanted to be was the rare and solitary aye-aye.

She said she considered the aye-aye her doppelgänger, the physical embodiment of her truest self. I was aghast. My wife was then fifty-four. She had gray hair and wore glasses. She looked like a typical, everyday Midwesterner. The word lemur originates from *Lemures,* Latin for ghostly spirits, and the nocturnal aye-aye is by far the ghostliest spirit of all. It has beaver teeth, bat ears, bug eyes, a rat snout, and a tail very like a witch's broomstick. But its strangest feature is an elongated middle finger, so supple it can bend in any direction. It's the sort of digit a skeleton in a hooded cape would use to tap you on the shoulder. In Madagascar it's common knowledge that a person who's pointed at by an aye-aye is marked for death.

Last summer I had to go to Madagascar to evaluate some fossilized remains of an extinct lemur, Palaeopropithecus maximus, for the museum. Gertrude was on vacation and insisted on coming along as my assistant. We were at the lemur subfossil site when a telegram came inviting me to participate in a symposium at the Duke University Primate Center in Durham, North Carolina. The topic was to be the hairy-eared dwarf lemur. The first ever seen alive by scientists had been recently discovered in a leech-infested Madagascan rain forest. At three and a half ounces, the hairy-eared dwarf lemur is the world's second smallest primate. (Only the two-ounce lesser mouse lemur is smaller.) The telegram said that as an expert on prosimian zoology, I would be an invaluable addition to the panel.

It was a fantastic opportunity. There was just one hitch: I'd have to leave for the States immediately. Fortunately, I'd already arranged for the Cleveland Museum of Natural History to acquire the Palaeopropithecus maximus bone fragments. Gertrude generously volunteered to remain behind a day or two and deal with all the bureaucratic red tape involved in shipping them home, so off I went to Duke University where I engaged in fascinating discussions about lemurs. When the symposium was over I flew to Cleveland. By the time I reached our house in Cleveland Heights

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it was night. Upstairs I found my wife lying in bed watching TV. But there was a man lying beside her. No, not a man, an aye-aye. I grabbed the remote control from Gertrude's hand and switched off the set. I was seized by an icy sense of foreboding.

"How could you do this? How could you do anything so completely—so utterly—"

"Please, Arnold, I can explain."

"Oh, why why why did I leave you alone over there?"

"You're getting yourself all worked up for no reason. The aye-aye's very happy. I'm very happy. How did the symposium go, by the way? I'm yearning to hear all about the hairy-eared dwarf—"

"I knew you had this absurd—fixation—but I never dreamed you were capable of—of *this.*"

The aye-aye sat up in bed and looked from one to the other of us, its bulging eyes glowing like tiny headlights, its bony finger clawing the bedspread.

"Sit down, Arnold, you're making it nervous pacing around like that. I'll tell you what happened but only if you stop acting like a nervous wreck."

It seemed that no sooner had my plane taken off from Madagascar than Gertrude had made her way to Nosy Mangabé, a remote island off the northeast coast that had been turned into an aye-aye refuge. There she'd howled, *"Tonk-tonk-brrr-RAWW-RAWWW,"* the unearthly cry of the greater bamboo lemur. This was answered by "Ha-hay, ha-hay, ha-hay," the nasal hoot of the aye-aye (Daubentonia madagascariensis). The two had ululated back and forth until dawn. Finally a bizarre black and silver apparition had emerged from the jungle and climbed into Gertrude's outstretched arms. She'd transported it back to the subfossil site. There she'd opened the crate and placed the Daubentonia madagascariensis beside the Palaeopropithecus maximus, drilled some air holes, and smuggled it to Cleveland.

All during Gertrude's recitation I'd been sitting on the bed with my head in my hands. When I spoke, my voice was hoarse with anger. "What you have done is unconscionable," I began. "The aye-aye is the most endangered lemur on earth."

"I realize that, Arnold, but—"

"Do you have any idea what the penalty is for sneaking an endangered species out of its country of origin?"

"Well, not exactly, but since no one's going to find out, it doesn't really make any—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You could very possibly end up in prison."

"Not if we keep the aye-aye a secret."

"You could end up in prison and I could end up in prison, as an accessory. We could both be behind bars for a very, very long—"

"Really, Arnold, you make it sound like I've committed murder or something."

"You have. Don't you see? The aye-aye is as good as dead right now. For your information, the climate of northeast Ohio is not compatible with the climate of northeast Madagascar. If it stays here, there's no way the aye-aye can survive the winter."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. We've got a fireplace. We've got radiators. We've got hot-water bottles. We've got—"

"And if you think for one moment that the beetle larvae in Cleveland are the same as the beetle larvae in Nosy Mangabé, think again. Even if the aye-aye doesn't freeze, it will definitely starve. I'm sorry, Gert, but the little critter has to go."

It stayed, of course. Gertrude gave it the run of the house. During the day it slept on an overhead beam in the attic where it fashioned a nest out of a Cleveland Indians pennant that it dragged up from the basement. Food turned out not to be a problem. The aye-aye liked everything: fish food, birdseed, takeout Szechuan dumplings, gerbil pellets. It also foraged on its own. As soon as the sun went down, it would leave its nest and press its flaring ears against the rafters. Suddenly it would begin to chisel a hole with its eighteen teeth (most lemurs have thirty-six), sending out a shower of splinters. When the hole was big enough, it would poke its long spindly finger in and out, in and out. Each time the finger reappeared, there sat a row of termites. Once the aye-aye got through lapping them up, Gertrude would put it on a leash and take it for a walk in the backyard.

Sometimes after it got dark we took the aye-aye sightseeing. I drove and Gertrude sat beside me holding the aye-aye upright on her lap so it could shine its lugubrious orange eyes on the city's points of interest. It seemed particularly taken with the Epworth-Euclid United Methodist Church with its oil-can steeple jutting into the night sky. We showed the aye-aye the Ameritrust Bank, the closest it would ever come to seeing an Italian Renaissance temple. If we circled the low-rise brick Georgian buildings of Shaker Square, the aye-aye would wrap its plumed tail over its face. But when we drove past the Cleveland Museum of Art, with its neoclassic marble facade and Ionic columns, it would prop its

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

clawed front feet on the dashboard and lean forward to get a better view.

Labor Day came and soon afterwards Gertrude went back to her teaching job. By now our social life had become nonexistent. We'd stopped having people over because we couldn't risk the aye-aye being discovered. The house was a mess. The aye-aye wasn't housebroken and the floors were covered with soiled copies of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and strewn with half-gnawed mangoes and coconuts. Gertrude was up most of the night because she couldn't bear to be asleep while the aye-aye was awake. At school she began showing signs of exhaustion. Once during a grammar lesson she found herself unable to explain what a dangling participle was. Another time she insisted to a class of eighth graders that Emily Brontë had written *Jane Eyre* and Charlotte Brontë had written *Wuthering Heights,* instead of the other way around. Things got so bad that the headmistress even called me at my office and said she was worried that my wife might be having a breakdown.

I knew we couldn't go on this way. I begged and pleaded with Gertrude to give up the aye-aye but always to no avail. Eventually my higher primate brain came up with a plan. Without telling Gertrude, I arranged with the museum to take the following week off.

When Monday came I pretended to drive to work as usual. Instead I parked a block from the house and waited until I was sure Gertrude had left to catch the rapid transit to school. Then I drove home. I stuffed some clothes into a suitcase, ran up to the attic, snatched the aye-aye out of its nest, and maneuvered it into a travel kennel. While I was loading everything into the car, it occurred to me that I'd better leave Gertrude a note so she wouldn't worry. I went back inside and sat down with a piece of paper at the kitchen table and drew a big heart in which I wrote in wobbly letters, *"DEAR GERTRUDE, THANK YOU FOR A VERY NICE TIME."* I signed it, *"THE AYE-AYE."* Then I drove to the Cleveland Hopkins Airport. At the check-in counter I explained that I was traveling with my pet dog. The airline representative became suspicious when she saw a skeletal licorice stick of a finger poking through the mesh window of the kennel. "It's a Heinz 57," I told her and the clerk seemed satisfied. At JFK in New York I checked the kennel through to Madagascar.

It took thirty hours and two stopovers before we touched down

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in Antananarivo, the capital. I hired a car and bumped along the rough terrain to the eastern coast with the kennel bouncing around in the backseat. I speak a little Malagasy, enough to talk a fisherman into ferrying me across to Nosy Mangabé. The island is completely covered with dense foliage. I set the kennel down on a tangle of houbouhoubou vines and swung open the little door. The aye-aye stuck out its head and took a whiff of good old Nosy Mangabé air. Home at last. Then it tottered out of the kennel and disappeared among the trees without so much as a backward glance. I stood still for a time, wondering what was going on inside its mind. I hoped that some night as it skewered grubs with its ebony finger, it would recall its months in the United States. Most of all, I hoped the aye-aye would remember Gertrude and how she had sung to it as we drove along the moonlit shoreline of Lake Erie, the towers and spires of Cleveland shimmering in the distance.

Retracing my route took me the better part of three days. Night had fallen by the time I finally swung my car into the driveway. I went in and tiptoed up to the bedroom. No Gertrude. I thought that maybe she'd gone for a midnight stroll. Ever since the aye-aye had come into our lives, she'd become more and more of a night person. I went to bed and immediately fell asleep. Something woke me. I opened my eyes. "That you, Gert?" I said. It was. I could just make out her silhouette in the darkness. She was standing beside the bed, one hand raised and clenched into a fist. I eased myself up on my elbows. Gertrude said not a word. Slowly she detached a single finger, the middle one, from her fist and pointed it at me. I shrank back against the headboard. Her finger seemed to be not so much pointing as aiming. Then she uttered a series of horrifyingly familiar cries. *"Ha-hay, ha-hay, ha-hay."*

Madagascans know that when an aye-aye points its long skinny finger at you, there's just one thing to do: crumble a tobacco leaf and smear your face with its juice. The only trouble was, I didn't have a tobacco leaf. In Cleveland you just never think you're going to need one. So there was no way I could deflect the full force of Gertrude's malevolence. Sheer unmitigated terror, not to mention jet lag, overcame me and I blacked out.

When I next opened my eyes it was morning. Gertrude's side of the bed hadn't been slept in. I showered and shaved. By the time I came downstairs Gertrude apparently had left for school. I made myself breakfast, got in the car, and headed for the office.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was October and Cleveland was in its autumnal splendor. As I drove along Euclid Avenue I felt more and more exhilarated. The aye-aye was safely back in its forest refuge. Sure, Gertrude was a little upset, but that was to be expected. She missed the aye-aye. In time she would come to realize that keeping it would have been impossible. Now she and I could resume living like normal Clevelanders. We could go out and enjoy all the cultural advantages the city had to offer: the art museum, the symphony orchestra . . .

My train of thought was interrupted by a billboard up ahead. It featured a rendering of Uncle Sam, looking just as he had in recruiting posters during World War II, and the words: *"I WANT YOU FOR THE U.S. ARMY. ENLIST NOW."* Beneath his starred top hat and bushy eyebrows, Uncle Sam's eyes glowered. He had his fist raised and he appeared to be pointing his index finger straight at me. Immediately the horror of the night before came rushing back. I let go of the steering wheel and crossed my arms in front of my face to blot out Uncle Sam's accusatory finger. A moment later the car smashed into an abutment and I was knocked unconscious.

I came to in the emergency room of the Cleveland Clinic. I was bruised and disoriented but had sustained no internal injuries or broken bones. The ambulance driver who had transported me to the hospital stopped by and informed me that my car had been damaged beyond repair. It was a miracle I was alive and that no one else had been injured.

When the ambulance driver left, I rose from my bed of pain and stumbled down the corridor to a pay phone. I dialed my office. My secretary said that the director of the museum had been trying to reach me all day and that he sounded as if he was on the warpath. She connected me to his extension. "Hi, boss," I said. "Wait till you hear where I'm calling—"

"I couldn't care less where you are," he bellowed. "Last night I read your article in the new *Prosimian Biology Monthly*. Your findings are hogwash. You've made the Cleveland Museum of Natural History a laughingstock. Every primatologist from here to Antananarivo must be shaking his head in disbelief. I want you out of here. Permanently." Then he told me I was fired and slammed down the phone.

I stood in my hospital gown, stunned. What was the director talking about? *What* article in the *Prosimian Biology Monthly*? I'd never written for that publication. Or had I? I couldn't think

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

straight. Everything ached. I looked at my watch. It was late afternoon, which meant Gertrude should be back from school. I needed desperately to hear her voice. I was out of change so I cadged a quarter from a passing orderly and called our home number. To my amazement, a man answered. He identified himself as a police officer and said that my wife had just obtained a court order of protection and that if I set one foot inside her door he would personally arrest me for trespassing. I demanded to speak to Gertrude. The policeman said she didn't wish to come to the phone. "Please, please put her on," I said, beginning to sob. He told me to buzz off.

In a single day I had lost my car, my job, my house, and my wife. Plus I had very nearly gotten myself killed. Could it all be just some nightmarish coincidence? No, it was Gertrude. Somehow she had acquired the aye-aye's mythic ability to do harm.

The hospital kept me overnight for observation. The next day I took the rapid transit downtown and checked into the Y. I considered going back to our house and picking up some belongings, but I was sure Gertrude had changed the locks and I didn't want to get caught breaking and entering. I used what little money there was in my bank account to buy some clothes and then started looking for work. That's when I discovered how little demand for primatologists there is in Cleveland. The zoology department of Case Western Reserve University didn't have any openings. The local high schools said I was overqualified. I tried to contact a few ex-colleagues from the museum but each refused to take my call.

Just when my unemployment insurance was about to run out I managed to wangle a job as a security guard at the Cuyahoga County Courthouse. I'd been there less than a week when a jealous coworker fabricated a story about how I had come to work drunk and I was canned. I was down to my last ten dollars when the deskman at the Y mentioned that the East Ohio Gas Company needed a night watchman. I applied for the job and got hired. A month went by and then the gas company announced it was cutting back and laid me off. I was beginning to think I would never find another job when finally I found an opening as janitor at the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo. My job was to clean the Primate, Cat, and Aquatics Building, and so once again I found myself in the proximity of lemurs. The zoo had six: four ringtail lemurs in one enclosure, two ruffed lemurs in another. Both species have a reverence for the sun. Struck by a beam of sun-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

light, they fall backwards, front legs spread, faces raised—a pose reminiscent of a saint ecstatically receiving the stigmata.

One winter afternoon, as I was mopping the floor, I stopped to see if any of the lemurs were engaged in sun worship. None were. The zoo building has skylights, but the day was overcast and they were all just sitting around on their haunches amid a less-is-more assortment of branches and rock formations. Except for some crackpot who had her face squashed against one of the glass partitions, no one was bothering even to give the lemurs a glance. It took me a moment to realize that the crackpot was Gertrude.

I was so surprised to see her that I dropped my mop. The wood handle hit the floor with a thud. In my confusion I took a step backwards and my leg slammed into my bucket, sending soapy water sloshing over the side. I was sure all the racket would make Gertrude turn around, but she took no notice. Her attention was fixed on the two lemur cages. Just then a ringtail lolloped forward and splayed its gray fingers against the glass. Gertrude began speaking to it. I edged closer. "Hello, O perfect one," I heard her say. They stared at each other, two lost Clevelanders, distant cousins a zillion times removed.

I pushed the cart containing my floor-cleaning implements over by the orangutans and attempted to regain my composure. I shook all over. Incredibly, I'd been given a chance to get my old life back. To get Gertrude back. There was no time to lose. I had to think what to do. Instantly an idea came to me. I would go to Gertrude and fall on my knees and beg her forgiveness for returning the aye-aye to Nosy Mangabé. Here in front of these ruffed and ringtail lemurs and whatever representatives of genus Homo sapiens happened by, I'd prevail on her to take me back. And she would, she would. She'd wait while I changed out of my janitor's overalls and then we'd drive back to our house in Cleveland Heights. That night in the bedroom we would embrace in the manner characteristic of our species. In the morning Gertrude would go off to teach English and I'd start looking for a decent job.

At that moment, standing in the Primate, Cat, and Aquatics Building, I believed myself the happiest man in Cleveland, Ohio. At last, I thought, the spell of the aye-aye has been broken. I emptied a nearby trashcan and lined it with a heavy-duty plastic bag. Then I went to find Gertrude. But when I got to where I had left her, my wife who always wanted to be a lemur had gone. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE VISITOR

by Monica Quill

Wanda pulled the door open furiously, expecting to see Leonard there, back before he left for work for a final shot about the bill she had run up consulting psychic advisers.

"Do you meditate, madam?"

"Meditate!"

Prepared to give as good as she got from Leonard in what promised to be an epic quarrel, one of those that stretched over a week, Wanda was startled by the tall man with the shaven head whose eyes seemed to look inward as much as outward at her.

"So few people do. How old are you?"

"That's none of your business." Her hand gripped the door but she found herself unable to slam it in his face.

"You know your age, that's what's important. How many years do you suppose you have left?"

He lifted his face, as if expecting an answer from on high. He low-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ered his eyes to her once more.

"Madam, would you step outside, please?"

"I'm not dressed."

"That is why you are reluctant to ask me in. We must talk."

It was a challenge. Of course she would ask him in. It wasn't as if she were indecent, for pete's sake. She wore a wrapper over her nightgown, and on her feet were the silly pink slippers with toes the shape of bunny heads that Leonard had bought her during one of the lulls in their long-term argument.

Veteran mystery writer Ralph McInerny usually reserves the pen name Monica Quill for novels and stories about his amateur detective Sister Mary Theresa; he employs it this month for a non-series story that involves a journey into the past. The author's most recent novels are *Half Past Nun* and *On This Rockne,* both from St. Martin's Press. ✝

"My name is Alexander," he said. He wore a business suit, light grey, with a purple shirt buttoned at the neck. The chain with the odd pendant might have been his necktie. He drifted into the living room and looked mournfully around.

"What's wrong?"

"There is no *you* here."

"Are you selling something?"

"Whatever I have is not mine to own. It is yours as much as mine."

He sat, but as one sits who may leave at any minute. Suddenly she wanted him to stay. She had the sense that this man, Alexander, was someone to whom she could talk, someone who would understand her. A bell sounded insistently from the back of the house and Wanda made an impatient noise.

"Ah," Alexander said, holding it as if it were a note and he about to chant.

"That's Mattie. My mother-in-law."

"And she summons you."

"Will you excuse me a minute?"

"I will come with you."

And he did, down the hallway to the kitchen and through the breezeway to the apartment they had made for Mattie in what had once been the garage. The kitchen was a mess, but at this hour of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the day what could you expect? Wanda **wanted** Alexander to see what her life was like, what she had to put up with.

Mattie was propped up in the La-Z-Boy chair she preferred to her bed, forever readjusting it in search of some angle of restfulness that would make life tolerable. Her hair stood on her scalp as if she had her finger in the light socket. She cocked her head and looked at Alexander.

"Who are you?"

"You are in the vestibule of the beyond, Martha. This is no time to ask childish questions. How is your soul?"

The old woman looked up at him pop-eyed and then, incredibly, burst into tears. Her scrawny veined hand reached for him, clawing at the air, until he took it, enveloping hers in his own two large hands. He turned to Wanda.

"Leave us alone."

Wanda turned and went back through the breezeway to the kitchen, where she began to clean up. She felt excitement. Something very important was happening. For five years, Wanda had been little more than her mother-in-law's keeper, waiting on her hand and foot, on edge all day, forever expecting that damned bell to ring. Whenever she hid the bell, the old woman would begin to whimper, a penetrating sound that crept through the house and found her no matter where she hid from it.

"Wanda, in a little while, it will all be ours."

That was Leonard's argument. They had moved in here with his mother, selling their house at a loss, but what the hell, they were through paying rent or mortgage installments. Wanda had calculated that they had sunk more money into Mattie's house than they would have paid staying in their own over that five-year period. Leonard did not want to bill his mother for improvements—the new drive, fencing along the back of the yard, the roof, and the redesign of the garage that was meant to give them a little breathing space from Mattie.

"You'll have your privacy this way, Mom."

"Why don't you just put me out with the trash?"

"Stop talking like that."

"This is a garage."

"Not anymore."

Leonard actually suggested that they move into the remodeled garage and let the old woman have the rest of the house.

"Over my dead body."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You sound like her."

"I'm going to look like her before . . ."

"Before what?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You want her dead, don't you? Well, say it: I wish Martha Bertle were dead."

"Don't you?"

That shut him up. Wasn't he something, trying to make her feel guilty? This idea had been a conspiracy from the beginning. They would ingratiate themselves with Mattie. His sister in Seattle sent a Christmas card that wasn't even signed, just Mr. and Mrs. Patrick Pringle, printed. Once the legend had been from Pringle Pharmacy. Laura obviously considered her mother already dead and gone. If Mattie could be made to realize that the only one who cared for her was Leonard, and Wanda, of course, well, then . . .

"We get this house?"

"That's not the half of it."

"How do you know?"

"You've seen the bankbook."

"Where would I see her bankbook?"

"It doesn't matter. She doesn't trust banks. Except insofar as they rent safe-deposit boxes."

"Does she have a safe-deposit box?"

Leonard adopted a sly smile and nodded slowly. It turned out he had never seen what was in it. He got angry when she suggested it was empty. That was the first quarrel that lasted more than two days. When the clouds cleared and the sun shone once more, Leonard said they had to get a look into that safety-deposit box.

After a month of discreet searching in the garage apartment, Wanda found the little envelope with the key to the safety-deposit box. Like a fool, she let Leonard talk her into going down to the bank and asking to open the box.

"Don't let on you're not the right Mrs. Bertle."

So Wanda showed the young man the key and he asked her to sign a little slip. That was when she sensed this wasn't going to work. He took the slip and riffled through a card index from which eventually he plucked a card. He laid her slip alongside the card. He frowned.

"You're Mrs. Bertle?"

"That's right."

"The signatures don't match."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's my mother-in-law's."

"This is her safety-deposit box?"

"She asked me to get something for her." Wanda leaned forward. "She's quite helpless now."

This posed a problem. The young man rose and crossed the floor as if he had a gun in his back and consulted with a woman whose hair was an artful mess. Her head began to sway negatively as she listened. The two came to where Wanda was sitting.

The woman nodded to the young man, who narrated what had happened to this point in time.

"Our Mrs. Bertle is your mother-in-law, Mrs. Bertle?" the woman asked.

"Yes."

"And you want to open her safety-deposit box?" She said this as if she were recounting an attempt at sacrilege. "The bank enters into the most solemn of arrangements with the holders of safety-deposit boxes, Mrs. Bertle."

She preached on, unctuously. Wanda felt as if she were the blackest of sinners.

"You must obtain power of attorney. Then and only then can we let you see Mrs. Bertle's box."

This and the many other annoying, aggravating, infuriating, humiliating episodes that had characterized her life since she and Leonard had moved in with Mattie went past Wanda's mind as she tidied up the kitchen. She realized that Alexander was standing in the doorway. When their eyes met she was certain he knew every secret of her life, that he had been inside her mind and memory while she had reviewed her dreadful life with Mattie.

"She will soon be dead," Alexander said.

"Mattie?"

He nodded, his eyes reading her soul.

"But she's strong as a horse."

"You are going to speed her on her way."

Trying to laugh it off did not work, not with his hypnotic eyes on her. He suggested that they return to the living room. There he spoke in a soft musical voice about the swiftness with which life passes, how the vast majority of human beings are so caught up in the trivia of everyday tasks that they never seriously ask themselves the only important question. He fell silent.

"What is the question?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He nodded, as if they were already in agreement. "What does it all mean?"

He elaborated. Moments become minutes which become hours, and the hours turn into days, the earth spins clockwise round the sun, its orbit altering into seasons, and the years follow one another, but from a cosmic perspective earthly millennia are insignificant. Think of the light year.

Wanda realized she hadn't thought of much of anything since she quit work to stay home with Mattie, and before that what she had thought about was her work at the bank. College? A four-year blur. Listening to Alexander, Wanda felt her mind stir from slumber and begin to operate in uncustomary but pleasant ways. The thought emerged that it was a very bad waste of the few winks of time she had on earth to be fretting over Mattie.

"She too longs for this to be over."

"Did you talk with her about it?"

"Of course."

"What am I supposed to do?"

It was laughably simple. Alexander knew of the sealed can in the basement containing the stuff Leonard put on his roses. She felt that Alexander knew everything. Bring the container upstairs, add a spoonful to the tea she made for Mattie, sit with her while she drank it, making her last moments pleasant. That was all there was to it.

"She doesn't want to do it herself?"

"Of course she wants to. But when is the last time she made the tea?"

At any other time that question could have started her on a litany of complaints. There was no physical reason for Mattie to sit atrophying in her chair day and night. It was sheer stubborn meanness. But Alexander was right. She was too mean even to poison herself. She would want Wanda to do it.

"I'll talk it over with Leonard tonight."

Alexander shook his head. "No. She doesn't want him to know. Besides, by tonight it will all be over."

"She wants me to do it today?"

"She longs for it."

"Talk to me some more."

"I have talked enough. Now you must meditate."

And it was over. He rose, went to the door, and was outside before she could move. When she looked down the drive, there was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

no sign of him. On the other side of the street, a car moved off.

Wanda went back to the living room, sat, and shut her eyes, intent on meditating. But the image of the sealed can in the basement formed in her mind and wouldn't go away. First she would bring it upstairs. She put it on the kitchen counter and sat on a stool. Her mind refused to concentrate on anything. She went back to see how Mattie was doing.

Her chair was upright, her hair brushed; she looked neat as a pin.

"I liked him."

"Alexander?"

"He understands the situation here."

"Yes."

"I've needed someone to talk with."

"So have I."

"You're no good at it, talk."

"I'm sorry."

"This whole thing was a mistake, I knew that from the beginning." Mattie sighed. "Well, it is time I got out of it."

She put back her head and closed her eyes. How happy she looked, and expectant. Wanda felt almost holy at the thought that she would help Mattie go on to a better place. Alexander spoke of it as far out beyond the galaxies, a place toward which one moved with incredible swiftness, yet it required an eternity to get there.

"Where the big bang took place," he whispered.

"Did he speak to you of the big bang?" Wanda asked the old woman.

But Mattie had drifted off, the sweetest smile on her dry thin lips.

Wanda thought of telephoning Leonard, to give him some indication of what his mother had decided, but Alexander's warning that she not tell him kept her from the phone. It was Leonard who called her.

"I'm sorry," he said, without preamble.

"Me too."

"I know how hard it is on you to live the way we do."

"It's not forever."

"That's right. We have to remember that."

"Your mother has been such an angel today."

"Angel?"

And soon she would be among the angels, hair brushed, bright-eyed, ready for that long long journey toward the place where the big bang had taken place. Leonard said he would be late and she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

urged him to come as soon as he could. What lay before her was vague but inevitable.

She took a sandwich in to Mattie at noon.

"I hate chicken salad."

"That's tuna."

"Did you make tea?"

"We'll have that later. The two of us."

"I want it now."

Well, she ought to have it when she wanted it. Wanda leaned toward the old woman, seeking in her expression some sign of the secret they shared, but Mattie turned away.

"You're blocking the sun."

How easy it was to tolerate the cranky old woman now. It would all be over soon. She made her a simple cup of tea to have with her sandwich. She and Mattie would have high tea at the usual time. It seemed wrong to break the routine on this last day.

Mattie sipped the tea suspiciously and wrinkled her nose. "It always tastes the same."

It was the only hint she gave of what they were going to do. Had she expected her luncheon tea to contain the fatal dose? She napped again after Wanda took away her tray. Wanda lay down for her nap but she could not sleep. She went back in with Mattie and sat there, watching the old woman sleep, imagining that she had already made tea in the way Alexander had told her the old woman wanted and Mattie had already begun her long astral journey to the beginning of it all . . .

"What are you doing here?"

Wanda snapped awake at the angry sound of Mattie's voice. It was nearly three o'clock.

"I fell asleep."

"I could see that."

Anger flared up in Wanda until she remembered. While she slept she had dreamed of Alexander, of his commanding presence, and of his soothing voice coming musically to her out of infinite space and time. She had read of people who claimed to have visions, heavenly visitations, who had been snatched up in alien spacecraft and taken on strange flights. Such stories no longer seemed incredible. If she had to describe Alexander, it would be difficult to make him sound like an earth person. Of course it was Mattie he had come for, not her. She was merely the instrument of the plan Alexander had drawn forth from deep inside Mattie's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

soul. She was ready to go now and she wanted a little help to put her on her way.

"I'm hungry."

"It hasn't been two hours since we had lunch."

"Let's have our tea."

"Be patient, Mattie. We'll have it at four, as we always do."

"I can't wait till four."

"Yes, you can."

They both could. Wanda went solemnly into the main house, leaving Mattie alone with her thoughts. The bell jangled as it usually did, but Wanda ignored it, not out of anger, as she might have before, but wanting Mattie to think of what lay ahead. To meditate. They could talk when it came time for tea.

In the kitchen she took a measuring cup and put into it two tablespoonfuls of the stuff from the can she had brought up from the basement. The odor when she pried open the lid was the odor of earth, of death, of a tomb sealed for centuries but opened now. She put the measuring cup by the tea kettle and pressed the lid down tight on the can. She returned it to its place on the basement shelf. It was 3:45 when she came up to the kitchen again.

She put on the water and went into the breezeway and strained her ear. Mattie was talking to herself. It seemed almost as good as meditation.

She put tea in the pot and then poured the contents of the measuring cup in as well. The whistle on the kettle began its shrill sound and she took it from the fire. The sound of Mattie's voice died away. She would know that tea was on its way.

Wanda added the boiling water to the pot, replaced the top, and slipped a cozy over it. She would let it steep a few minutes before taking it in. The tea cart was one Mattie had had for years and it meant much to her to have her tea rolled in to her on it. Wanda made little sandwiches and petits fours and then put the teapot on the cart.

"Tea time," she sang out, and started toward the garage apartment.

She rolled the cart up next to Mattie's chair, in case she wanted to pour. But the old woman sat with folded hands, an expectant look on her face as she surveyed the goodies on the cart. Wanda poured a cup and handed it to her mother-in-law. It was a solemn moment. Mattie waited while she added milk and sugar, she liked lots of sugar, then stirred vigorously. How eager she looked.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Wanda poured another cup and took a chair. Mattie sipped, pursed her lips against the heat, then sipped again. She took a sandwich from the cart and nibbled delicately on it, then drank more tea.

"Mmmmmm," she said.

She drank it down and held out her cup for more. Wanda poured again. Mattie would want a third cup, she always did, and usually Wanda discouraged it since it meant several trips to the bathroom, but today she gladly poured the third cup.

And waited. She brought her own cup to her lips, then stopped. Dear God, she was not ready for any trip through the stars, not yet, not when finally her long agony was coming to an end. She and Leonard would be alone, the cause of their quarrels would be gone, the future would lie bright ahead of them again.

Mattie's grip on her cup loosened and it rolled down her lap and onto the floor. The old woman's head had snapped back and she was gasping for air. Wanda had not been prepared for this. She had expected Mattie simply to drift into sleep. But instead the old woman fought against going, scratching at her throat, fixing Wanda with her bright angry eyes until her eyelids fluttered, her eyes rolled upward, and she slumped forward.

Wanda straightened the old woman in her chair and tried to smooth away the awful expression on her face. The doorbell rang.

She stood, feeling panic at first, and then, remembering Alexander's visit earlier, hurried through the house to the front door, pulling it open with a great smile.

"Nine-one-one," a man said, pushing past her. He was followed by another. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

"The woman who's been poisoned."

She managed to point and they sped through the house. She followed. They reached the breezeway and went right on, as if they knew now where they were going. Wanda couldn't watch while they worked over Mattie. Before she left, she saw one of the paramedics shrug at the other. She was seated at the kitchen table when they came in.

"She's dead."

"I know."

"We came as quickly as we could."

"Who called you? Alexander?"

"I think it was your husband."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"My husband."

They checked and it was true, Leonard had phoned 911 to report that his mother had just been given poison and would they get over there as quickly as they could.

Given poison. That phrase was the beginning of her realization that something was wrong. She tried to tell the paramedics about Alexander and how he had talked to Mattie, but their eyes kept moving away. More police arrived. She asked them to call Leonard and the phone was pushed toward her. Leonard was not in his office.

He had said he would be late tonight. He was not yet home when a detective advised her to call a lawyer. "My husband is my lawyer."

"You'll want someone else, ma'am. After all, he made the call."

Leonard had not come home when she was taken downtown and he did not come to see her. The lawyer she eventually got was named Sawyer. He just looked at her when she told him about Alexander but later, as the trial approached, he wanted to hear all about it.

"That's our only defense," he said.

"Nobody will believe it."

"That's the idea."

Leonard still had not come to see her. How could she complain? After all, she was accused of killing his mother. In the end, she pleaded guilty by reason of insanity. She had never been so humiliated in her life. When she stood for sentencing, she turned and looked at the few curious people in the courtroom. Leonard was there. He was talking to the man beside him, a tall man with a crew cut. And then Leonard looked toward her and their eyes met. But it was the face of the man beside him Wanda saw, the great staring eyes, the look of serenity.

"Alexander!" she screamed. "There he is."

She was wrestled into her chair by the matron but she continued to call out. They had to listen. The man who was responsible was there in the courtroom with her husband. Two more matrons were required to remove her from the courtroom. Sawyer came to tell her what her sentence was.

"As soon as the doctors say you're okay, you go free."

She nodded. In the interim since being removed from the courtroom, she had begun to understand.

"A piece of advice," Sawyer said. "Forget about Alexander. As long as you talk about him, they're going to keep you locked up."●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

POISONED WITH POLITENESS

by Gillian Linscott

"Mr. Leather sends his respects to Mr. Ludlow and wonders if he could assist in the matter of a young woman who has done a murder."

Harry Leather's laborious writing dinted the page like hoofprints in mud. His note arrived on a windy afternoon in the April of 1867 at the offices of the newspaper where I was earning my blameless living as a subeditor. The messenger who brought it to my desk had the air of a man who'd rather not be responsible for a communication smeared with mud and various other stains that included, from the smell, neat's-foot oil and strong porter. The wonders of the penny post had made no impression at all on Harry Leather. A man who, without blinking, would bid fifty guineas he hadn't got for a horse he fancied, grudged expenditure on stamps. A groom taking a cob to market might hand his message to a carrier who'd pass it to a gentleman's coachman whose second cousin delivered turnips to Covent Garden and so, in the fullness of time, it would get to me. The address at the top of the note was a livery stables in Buckinghamshire. Luckily, several men in the subeditors' room owed me favours, so by the following afternoon I was walking from the railway station along an avenue of budding elm trees, with an assurance from the porter that I couldn't miss the stables.

It was pleasant country and, although no more than twenty miles from London, the spring seemed to be coming in earlier and

Gillian Linscott is the creator of English suffragette detective Nell Bray, the protagonist of a series published in Britain and the U.S. For her short stories she goes half a century further back, to mid Victorian times. This is her second story for *EQMM* to feature the duo of journalist detective Thomas Ludlow and his disreputable friend from the world of horses, Harry Leather.

©1997 by Gillian Linscott

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

more softly there. Blackbirds sang and primroses gleamed as bright as pieces of china in the grass by the roadside. After a mile of road muddy enough to make me wish I'd worn stouter boots I came to a public house called The Woodman's Rest and a knot of cottages. Between the public house and one of the cottages was the entrance to a driveway, flanked by stone pillars with gates of elaborate ironwork closed across it. Squire's place, I thought, but not your hospitable hail-fellow country squire of the old school. Those firmly closed gates said that visitors were not welcome and the entrance to the drive, which you'd expect to be churned up with carriage tracks, looked as if no hoof or foot had fallen on it for weeks. On the opposite side of the road a board advertising horses kept at livery and hacks for hire marked my destination and my friend's latest place of business. Harry is a groom, horse breaker, jockey, dealer—anything you care to name to do with horses, with a few chances on the side to earn an extra guinea that doesn't necessarily have the word honest attached to it, and he seldom stays in one place for more than six months at a time. He was at me as soon as I'd set foot in the yard.

"What's been keeping you Mr. Ludlow? This rate, they'll have her sentenced and hanged before you get a look in."

He led the way through the tack room to a smaller room crammed with sacks and feed bins, dusted off the top of a bin with his handkerchief, and invited me to take a seat, then settled himself on another bin, empty pipe in his hand.

"Why the hurry? If this young woman who's done a murder is going to be hanged in any case, I don't see why they need my help to do it."

Harry knew very well that my amateur interest was in cases that had a flavour of the extraordinary about them. I was annoyed to be classed with the sort of ghoul who'd come to witness the downfall of some hapless country girl.

"It's not your help in getting her hanged that's wanted. It's getting her off being hanged."

"But you said in your note she'd done a murder."

He nodded.

"And you want me to get her off? Why?"

"Because she's not a bad young woman and the one she killed was as spoiled and cussed a creature as you'd find in a long day at a bad market."

A ray of sunshine, flecked with motes of bran, shone through

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the window on Harry's lined and weather-beaten face. I knew that his morality seldom coincided with a preacher's, but this was a staggerer even from him.

"If I understand you aright, you're asking me to be an accessory in perverting the course of justice."

He looked at the ceiling. "I knew a racehorse once named Course of Justice. Never won anything to speak of."

The story he told me had its origins in the big house behind the locked gates. I'd been right in thinking it was the local squire's mansion, also that its squire was not of the old sporting kind.

"Mr. Haslem. He's thirty or so, but the sort that's never been young. Thin, fidgety kind of a man. Plenty of money from his father, but leaves the estate work to a bailiff. They say he's writing a book about something in Latin. Goodness knows how he came to marry her, except I suppose she wasn't a bad-looking woman on her good days, but a temper on her like an army mule in a thistle patch."

"Are we talking about the person who was murdered?"

"Yes, we are. Veronica, her name was."

"You met her?"

He sucked on his pipe.

"I quarrelled with her."

"Over a horse, I suppose."

"What else? One day at the start of March, about two weeks before it happened, she came down the drive in her victoria, going visiting. Two bays she had to pull it. I was outside the gate here and I could see one of the bays was lame. Her coachman knows me, so he pulled up without asking her first and said would I have a look at it, see what was wrong. Well, madam sticks her head out of the window and starts screeching at him for stopping without her permission. I take no notice of her and start feeling the bay's leg. Off fore, swollen like a puffball and hot as a boiling kettle. I say to the coachman he shouldn't be driving a horse in this state, and he looks back over his shoulder at her and whispers to me that she insisted because she had to go visiting. So I take my hat off and go up to her and say, civil enough, that the horse isn't fit to be driven and I'll hire her another. She curses me up hill and down dale and tells the coachman to drive on or she'll dismiss him on the spot. So off they go with the bay limping like a man with a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wooden leg. I'd have taken the whip to her first, but the coachman's got a family to feed."

"And two weeks after that she was dead?"

"Yes, two weeks after that she was dying of convulsions in the house of a lady she was visiting, after she'd stepped out of that very same victoria she cursed at me from."

"And from that incident, you conclude that Mrs. Veronica Haslem deserved murdering."

"There's a curse on the man or woman that drives a lame horse. It says so in the Bible."

I'd heard him quote that text before but have never met the Biblical scholar who could find it anywhere from Genesis to Revelation. But to tell that to Harry would make a very atheist out of the man, and the swarm of sins clustering round his head is black enough without that. Instead I asked him to tell me more about Mrs. Haslem's death.

"She was going to pay an afternoon call on a lady that lives a good two hours' drive away. She has her lunch in her room, changes into her costume for paying calls, and gets into her victoria with the hood up and my friend driving from the box, as usual."

"Travelling alone?"

"Yes. The coachman swears that they didn't stop anywhere along the way, nobody got in with her and she never called out to him or said anything the whole journey."

"What was the weather like?"

"Nasty biting wind. She was all wrapped up in rugs, of course, so she was all right, at least she should have been. Anyway, they arrive at the house, the coachman draws up and goes to help her out. He notices she seems a bit unsteady on her feet and her voice is croaky but there's nothing new about that. He watches her go up the steps to the door, the butler opens it, and she goes inside. The coachman drives round to the stables, sees to the horses, then goes into the kitchen for a cup of tea. But he's no more than taken a gulp of it when there's this confloption upstairs and a maid comes flying in to say get the doctor because Mrs. Haslem's taken ill in the drawing room."

"What were the symptoms?"

"She said she felt her throat burning and asked for water but she couldn't keep it down. She was groaning and clutching at her stomach and shouting out that she'd been poisoned. All this in the drawing room with a lot of other ladies there."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Did she say who she thought had poisoned her?"

"She did, several times over. She said Miss Thorn had put poison in her travelling flask because she wanted to get rid of her and marry her husband."

"Miss Thorn being . . . ?"

"The governess. Anyway, they carried her up to the bedroom. The doctor was out on his rounds, and by the time he got there she was in convulsions. She was dead before they could get word to her husband."

"Where was he?"

"Up in London all day, buying books."

"Was there any evidence for this business about poison in the travelling flask?"

He looked ill at ease.

"Well, there was a flask and Miss Thorn did have it in her hands. There's no getting away from it."

I said he'd better tell me the worst of it and get it over. On that cold March afternoon, at two o'clock, the victoria was drawn up and waiting at the front door. Mrs. Haslem came down the steps. Behind her Miss Thorn, holding the Haslems' eight-year-old son by the hand. The boy, she said, wanted to see his mother driving away. The coachman settled Mrs. Haslem in the victoria, positioning the foot warmer for her, tucking a blanket round her. While this was going on, the boy was on one side, talking to his mother, Miss Thorn on the other.

"The coachman's just getting up on the box, ready to drive off, when Mrs. Haslem says, quite sharply, 'Have you taken my flask, Miss Thorn?' At first the governess looks as if she wants to deny it, but Mrs. Haslem says, 'Don't try to lie to me. You've got it there behind your back.'"

"And had she?"

"She had. So she has to hand it over, looking shamefaced."

"What sort of flask?"

"Flat silver one. The sort a gentleman would carry in his pocket out hunting."

"Did the coachman see Miss Thorn put anything into it?"

"No."

"She'd have had a chance, though, wouldn't she, while Mrs. Haslem was talking to the boy?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"She'd have had to be quick about it, but yes, I suppose she would."

"What did Mrs. Haslem have in the flask? I suppose it would be something to keep out the cold on a long journey."

"Short or long journey, summer or winter, it was all the same to her. Brandy."

"In other words, Mrs. Haslem was a habitual drinker?"

"Habitual! She drank the way a horse eats grass. That time I had that argument with her, I could smell the brandy coming off her breath."

"Did anybody else touch the flask?"

"There was only the boy and the coachman there. The coachman says he didn't, and I don't suppose the boy would poison his mother."

"And you've told me they didn't stop on the journey. Where did the brandy in the flask come from?"

"Mrs. Haslem's own bottle she kept in her room. She'd sent her maid to buy a couple of bottles the day before."

"Why did she have to do that? Surely her husband would keep brandy in the house."

"Only under lock and key. He was driven distracted by her drinking."

"You say she had lunch in her room?"

"Chicken in aspic, bread and butter, China tea. And in case you're thinking the poison might be in that, she didn't finish her lunch so the maid did after she'd gone and she was as fit as a flea."

"It looks like an open-and-shut case against Miss Thorn. What happened at the inquest?"

"Open verdict."

"Astounding! Didn't it come out about Mrs. Haslem accusing the governess?"

"Oh yes, it came out, in a manner of speaking. Only everybody round here knew the wicked tongue she had when the drink was in her. They felt sorry for her husband and anybody else who had to do with her."

"What about the symptoms? What did the doctor say?"

"That she'd been very sick, had convulsions, and her heart had stopped—which it tends to do when you die."

"Is this whole countryside in a conspiracy to protect the governess? It can only be a matter of time before she's under lock and key."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You could think of something, though, couldn't you, a gentleman of your experience? Just enough to give everyone an excuse for pretending to think she didn't do it."

His tone, soft as any sucking dove, was the one he used to get scared colts to come to his hand.

"Where is this paragon of a poisoner?"

"Still up at the hall."

"What!"

"Mr. Haslem has kept her on. After all, someone has to look after the boy."

I sat and thought for a while.

"If you want me to take any part in this, you must arrange for me to speak to the governess. Can you do that?"

"Yes. Give me a few hours."

"Mr. Haslem too."

"He's not seeing people. Hasn't been out of the house or had anyone calling since the inquest."

"What about the doctor and the maid?"

"Dr. Gaynor's easy enough, he's just up the road. The maid's gone back to her parents ten miles away."

"Didn't Mr. Haslem keep her on?"

"The fact is, she bolted straight after the funeral. The gossip from the hall is that some of Mrs. Haslem's diamonds had gone missing."

"Is the maid suspected of stealing them?"

"I don't know, because Mr. Haslem wouldn't have any inquiries made. I had that from the solicitor's clerk."

"But this is incomprehensible. The man's wife is poisoned and he keeps the woman suspected of it in his household. Her jewellery's stolen, he does nothing to recover it and lets the maid run away. Isn't it more likely that the maid poisoned Mrs. Haslem to save herself from being found out about the jewellery?"

"It wasn't the maid she accused."

"Accused or not, I want to speak to the maid before anyone else."

He lent me a cob to ride and a boy on a pony to show me the way. As we trotted along together under the green leaves I thought it was a poor thing if I could only lift the noose from one young woman's neck to drop it round another's, but Harry as usual had me caught and bitted whether I liked it or not.

Susan was the maid's name. When we got to the cottage, which looked as if it hadn't had a lick of paint or dab of plaster since

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Queen Anne's time, she was in the kitchen with her mother making pies. There was a clutch of children toddling, crawling, and bawling round the open door, scrawny hens pecking unhopefully, their skin pink and shiny in patches where feathers had been scratched away. For a daughter of such a place, the position of lady's maid must have been a considerable prize. When I came to the door she was laughing at something one of the children had said, a pretty, plumpish girl in her twenties, neater than you'd expect from the confusion round her, her dark hair tucked under a clean white cap. The laughter died away when she saw me, turned to misery when I introduced myself and asked if I might have a word about the late Mrs. Haslem.

"Would you come with me, sir, where we can be quiet."

Mother, brothers, and sisters watched open-mouthed as she led the way up the stairs that rose straight from the kitchen, little better than a ladder. If I say we talked in her bedroom, I wouldn't wish to impute to her a lack of propriety. The place was no more than a kind of open cabin at the top of the stairs with one wide bed that almost certainly accommodated several sisters as well as herself. All the time we talked I was half aware of her mother's worried murmurs from below, trying to keep the children quiet. I asked her about the brandy.

"Every week, sir. She'd give me the money and I'd go into town without letting anyone know. Two bottles a week it was, three sometimes."

"That last day, she had her lunch in her room?"

"Yes, sir, but she hadn't much appetite. She never had these days."

"Was there any sign that she was ill?"

"None at all, sir."

"Did she fill the brandy flask while you were there?"

"Yes, sir. She rinsed it in the water from her ewer, then she opened the new bottle I'd bought from the shop and filled it up over the basin."

"A new bottle, you're sure of that?"

"Quite sure, sir. She had to break the wax seal on it."

"And did she, or you, put anything else in that flask except brandy?"

"Oh no, sir."

Her eyes met mine. Scared eyes, with tears beginning to wash over them but not, I thought, guileful.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You know Mrs. Haslem died, almost certainly, as a result of what was in that flask."

She looked down at her lap and nodded.

"Have you any idea how poison might have been introduced into the flask?"

"No, sir. I know what was said, but I don't think she would. She was always kind to me."

"Miss Thorn?"

Another tearful nod. I didn't care for the situation at all, but there was no going back.

"There's another matter. Did you know that after Mrs. Haslem's death, some possessions of hers were found to be missing?"

An intake of breath. Her hands, which had been lying motionless in her lap, began twisting together.

"Do you know anything about them?"

She was crying in earnest now. Her hands came up to cover her face and a few muffled words squeezed out through her fingers.

". . . didn't mean any harm . . . gave them to me . . . for going to buy the brandy for her . . . because she didn't need them any more."

I stood, taken aback by the speed of her collapse, pitying her and thinking of the temptation it must have been.

"Don't you think it might be a good idea to give them to me and I can take them back to her husband?"

I could make no promises about there being no prosecution, but I was inwardly determined to urge mercy on Mr. Haslem. She drew her fingers down just enough to look at me.

"You have them still?"

"Here, all of them."

She looked over at a battered wooden chest on the other side of the bed.

"I'm engaged to be married, you see, sir. I was saving them for my wedding."

The thought of a rustic bride glittering with Mrs. Haslem's diamonds was almost ludicrous enough to force a smile, even in those circumstances. But I kept my face grave as she went heavily round the bed and threw back the lid of the box.

"There they are, sir. And these, and these, and these."

They came at me in a soft avalanche across the bed. White silk and satin, cotton and broderie anglaise, pink ribbons, green ribbons, stockings, garters, and a dozen other frills and furbelows that only

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the goddess of lingerie or her devotees could name. Over them, from the other side of the bed, scared brown eyes looking up at me.

"What in the world are these?"

"Her things, sir. She said I could have them because she'd had new ones made. She told me I could keep them, sir."

When I told Harry he laughed so hard he nearly fell off the feed bin.

"Well, are you taking them back to Mr. Haslem?"

"Can you imagine me riding back across country with an armful of lady's cast-off unmentionables? Let her keep them for her wedding day."

"So she didn't take the diamonds?"

"I'm sure of it. The best actress in London couldn't fake such simplicity. And I'm equally sure she put nothing in that flask."

His grin faded. "Still looks bad for the governess, then?"

"Not good, certainly. Still, there's one thing that puzzles me. Why does a lady married nine years or more take a fancy for a whole wardrobe of new underthings? The ones she gave her maid weren't worn out by any means."

"That, Mr. Ludlow, is a matter beyond our understanding. Unless . . ."

"Unless."

The word hung there for a moment between us in the bran-flecked air, then he stood up. "Miss Thorn will be arriving any minute. She's bringing the boy down to look at a pony."

A pony phaeton delivered them. A boy got out first, muffled up against the cold, then a young woman in a black coat and hat. I'd imagined that a person who could arouse such concern in Harry would have some special appeal—one of those fragile, flowerlike women. This was no flower. She was squarish in build and broad of shoulder. Her face was attractive in its way, but from an impression of common sense and openness rather than delicacy. Her hair was dark, her eyes a deep grey under straight black brows. If I'd been asked to sum her up in one word, that word would have been honest, the way a rock or a tree is honest because it has no other way to be. But then I'd seen people double-dyed in guilt who had the same air. She looked at me, then towards the boy, who was already well out of hearing, leaning over a stable door with Harry.

"So you're the gentleman who's come to ask me if I poisoned

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mrs. Haslem? Mr. Leather says you'll want to ask me questions. Ask anything you please."

Her voice had a hint of the north country in it. I suggested that we should go into the tack room and sit down, but she wanted to stay outside where she could see young Master Haslem. It was a strange way of questioning. We stood there side by side in the yard as a bay pony was brought out and the boy mounted on it.

"Did you take Mrs. Haslem's flask out of the victoria?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"If I could stop my employer's wife making a scandal of herself before the whole county, it was my duty to do it. Mr. Haslem was ill with worry over it. It was bad enough with her friends near here. He didn't want her to call on people who were more in society because the whole world would know, but she was a stubborn woman."

No nonsense from Miss Thorn about not speaking ill of the dead. Her contempt was rocklike.

"So you decided to do something about it?"

"I decided to get the flask away from her. I wanted her to arrive at the house she was visiting as sober as she was ever likely to be."

"Was this your own decision, or in consultation with Mr. Haslem?"

"He didn't know what I was going to do."

"Did you put anything in it?"

"No. I didn't even unscrew the cap of the flask. I should have done that—poured it away on the gravel and let her dismiss me if she liked."

"And perhaps saved her life."

She gave me a questioning look.

"If there was poison in that brandy, you'd have saved her life by pouring it away."

"How could I have known that? How could anybody know that?"

"You didn't know?"

She took a step to face me.

"I swear to you, as I'd swear at God's judgement seat if my soul depended on it, that I didn't know."

We followed Harry and young Haslem on the pony to the paddock at the back. All the time that he was walking and trotting the animal I was trying to work up to a question which there was no delicate way of asking. In the end I came flat out with it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Do you think it possible that Mrs. Haslem had a lover?"

A moment of shock, then anger.

"That's a most improper question to put to me. I have no intention of answering it."

And she moved smartly away to the paddock rail. Back in the yard afterwards she ignored me but smiled at the boy and his babble of enthusiasm for the pony, wrapped his scarf round his neck, and saw him settled in the phaeton. With her boot on the step she turned to me, icily polite.

"I'd offer to shake hands, but you might not want to take the hand of a woman they think is a poisoner."

Then she was in her seat and away.

"Something wrong with your arm?" Harry asked.

He'd caught me with my hand half extended, responding too late to what she'd said.

"That accusation of her wanting to marry Mr. Haslem—was there any truth in it?"

"Well, the talk was he spent more time in the schoolroom than with his wife, but so would I have in his place."

"I need to speak to him, whether he likes it or not."

I requisitioned some of Harry's business stationery and composed a careful letter, standing at the old desk in the corner of the tack room where he made up his accounts. The stable boy was sent up to the hall with it. By then it was late afternoon and Harry informed me that Dr. Gaynor would be back from his rounds. With the westering sun throwing long tree shadows across the road, I walked the mile to a substantial brick house in a couple of acres of ground.

The doctor was younger and more urbane than I'd expected in a country practitioner, a handsome man in his late thirties. He was working in his dispensary when I arrived but kindly invited me to sit down in his study over a glass of sherry, fastidiously amused by my amateur interest in murder and quite willing to discuss the Haslem case.

"A very sad affair. I take it you've heard the details from Mr. Leather."

"You were called to Mrs. Haslem?"

"Far too late to be of any use. I was at a confinement on the far side of my practice. When the messenger came I galloped like the devil, but there was nothing I could do."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Are you in any doubt that she was poisoned?"

He looked at me over the sherry glass.

"Do you want me to tell you what I said at the inquest?"

"I suspect, like other people, you were not anxious to condemn a certain person."

"Unprofessional on my part, if so."

"But human. I think I have my answer."

He sighed. "She was poisoned."

"Did you form any idea as to the poison used?"

He swirled the sherry round in the glass.

"Your knowledge of toxicology is probably as extensive as mine."

"Aconitine?" Another sigh. I prompted, "The symptoms suggest it and there have been a number of cases recently."

"As you say, the burning in the mouth. The convulsions."

"So Mrs. Haslem was poisoned with aconitine. And as far as we can tell, that aconitine could only have been administered in the brandy she drank on her last journey. Can you as a medical man see any other conclusion?"

We went on discussing it, in a guarded way, over another glass of sherry. But no other conclusion emerged, beyond my conviction that the doctor too favoured mercy above justice for Mrs. Haslem's murderer.

Back at Harry's stables, a curt note had arrived from Mr. Haslem to say he'd see me at ten the following morning. Harry offered me the hospitality of his hayloft for the night and I treated him to a supper of chops and claret in The Woodman's Rest. We chose a quiet corner so that I could report progress—or lack of it.

"Aconitine. Does that make things worse for Miss Thorn?"

"Yes. It acts quite quickly, so there's no hope that the poison might have been in what Mrs. Haslem ate at lunch or anything before. You'd expect the first symptoms within about half an hour, the tightness and burning in the lips and throat. That fits quite well with her getting out of the victoria and then collapsing in the drawing room. In fact . . ."

"In fact what, Mr. Ludlow?"

I sat there with a piece of mutton chop on my fork, staring at his still-hopeful face.

"Harry, this is an odd thing. You said it took her two hours to be driven to the place she was visiting. Now, wouldn't you expect her to be taking nips out of that flask the whole journey?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I would."

"And yet if she'd drunk from it at the start of the journey, she'd have been in a much worse state by the end of it. She was well enough to speak and to walk up to the front door. That suggests she didn't drink from the flask until near the end of the journey. Is that likely?"

"It doesn't help, though, does it? It's still the flask we're looking at."

"I need to talk to the coachman. Early tomorrow before I see Mr. Haslem. Can you arrange that?"

"Sure as sunrise."

Mr. Haslem's coach house was a shadowy building with a few shafts of morning sunlight coming through narrow windows. The dark bulk of an old-fashioned closed carriage took up a lot of the space. Beside it were the pony phaeton and a victoria with the hood up. The coachman was polishing the phaeton but straightened up when he saw us. Harry introduced me after his fashion.

"This is Mr. Ludlow. I don't know what he's going to ask you, but you tell him what he wants to know."

The coachman stood like a man on trial.

"What happened to the victoria that day Mrs. Haslem died?"

He swallowed. "I drove it back, sir."

"It must have been dark by the time you got it back here."

"Pitch. It was past midnight."

"What did you do with it?"

"Backed it into the coach house and left it. Next day I had it out to clean it and put it away again."

"Has anyone used it since?"

"No. The victoria was hers. Nobody else seems to have cared to use it."

"What happened to the rugs and the foot warmer and so on?"

"They're still in there."

We all three poked our heads under the hood. On the seat, a dark woollen blanket and canvas cover. I plunged my hand into the darkness beside the folded blanket. It touched fur.

"Ah." I drew it out so that they could see it, the thing flopping heavily in my hand. Harsh fur, wolf's or bear's probably. "This is the fellow I was looking for."

Harry moved in to look and drew back, disappointed.

"It's only her travelling muff."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It was a cold day and she'd be wearing light gloves with her best visiting outfit. Naturally she'd have a muff for the journey."

I slid my hands inside the fur's silk lining. "Let's have some more light here. One of the carriage lamps."

A scrape of flint, a flare of light. I waited until they were back with the lamp then slid a hand out and let the muff dangle. Something small fell to the brick floor and burst open in the circle of lamplight. "Whatever you do, don't tread on them."

On the bricks was an enamelled box of the kind that ladies use to carry pills, with small white globes like chalky pearls scattered round it. Harry knelt, picked one up, sniffed.

"They're only . . ."

If I hadn't grabbed it, he'd have put it in his mouth.

"They're what will keep Miss Thorn from hanging. Get some paper."

We tore the wrapping from a new cake of harness soap, bundled the box and most of its contents together. A few minutes later I was walking up the steps to Mr. Haslem's front door.

The butler showed me into a handsome study on the ground floor, with leather-bound books from floor to ceiling and classical texts and dictionaries ranged on a desk by the window. The man himself seemed less substantial than his books, thin and pale, with sunken eyes. He held himself painstakingly upright, like a marionette on a single string that might part at any moment and land him in a disjointed heap on his Turkey carpet. I'd explained myself to him in my letter—as far as a total stranger's interest in a gentleman's affairs can be explained—and came straight to the point.

"I spoke to Miss Thorn. She says she wanted to get the flask away from your wife and hadn't discussed it with you."

"Miss Thorn is trying to protect me. We had discussed it."

"Discussed what exactly?"

His face creased up. He may have been a clever man with his books but he lied clumsily and painfully, like an inexpert angler with a fishhook through his finger.

"Discussed how to prevent my wife obtaining brandy."

"Did you know she was going to take the flask out of the victoria."

"Yes," he said. But his face winced "no."

"Have you and Miss Thorn ever discussed the properties of aconitine?"

"Aconitine?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"A vegetable alkaloid. A poison."

"No."

"What happened to the flask Mrs. Haslem drank from?"

"I . . . I ordered it to be brought to me."

"Were the contents analysed?"

"It was empty . . . quite empty."

I'd come to him with one doubt left and now it had gone. Like everyone else, with just one exception, he was thinking only of the flask. I was on the point of explaining when he raised his hand to stop me. It was a surprisingly decisive gesture for a nervous man and when he spoke again his voice was firmer than it had been.

"Mr. Ludlow, since you have chosen to take an interest in my affairs, there's something you should know. At present I am in mourning. When that period ends, I shall ask Miss Thorn to do me the honour of becoming my wife."

He kept his eyes on me, nerved for my protest. There was a kind of desperate heroism about him.

"In that case," I said, "you will be marrying a brave and loyal young woman. And an innocent one."

Shock and relief together came flooding over his face. He almost collapsed and had to support himself on the corner of the desk. I took my hand out of my pocket and rolled a few of the little white globes across the blotter. He looked from them to me and back again, saying nothing.

"You were all looking in the wrong place. Your wife's last words were that the poison was in her flask. She died believing that. But ask yourself if she might have been killed by a poison that was not in the flask and what's the answer?"

"But she took nothing else since leaving the house."

"Not quite. A lady is going visiting, to a fashionable house where she wishes to make a good impression. She won't do that with brandy on her breath. So she'll take the precaution of concealing in her travelling muff a little box of oil of peppermint lozenges. Those were the last things your wife took, not the brandy."

He stared at them, still not speaking.

"My friend Mr. Leather is taking the rest to London to a laboratory that I know. If my suspicion is right, they will indeed contain oil of peppermint—and aconitine."

"Then he killed her. Stole her jewels and killed her."

The relief was there, but pain too. I didn't say to him that there were more ways than one of stealing a woman's jewels. *Take them*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and sell them, my love, and with the money we shall run away together to that warm sweethearts' nest in Paris. Or Venice, or Timbuktu, or the dreams of deluded women knew where. No part of her lover's plan to take a drinking and demanding woman along with him.

"Yes, he killed her. How long had you known about your wife and Dr. Gaynor?"

Two days later I was back with Harry at The Woodman's Rest, thinking I'd earned some congratulations.

"Once I knew about the peppermint pills, there was very little doubt. Getting hold of aconitine wouldn't be so difficult. Making it into pills would be—unless you had a dispensary at hand."

"Pity he got away, wasn't it?"

"That's your friend the coachman's fault, not mine."

The foolish man had flown to the kitchen in high excitement to tell them all about the discovery. From there the news must have come within half an hour to the doctor's ears, because when I went back to speak to him I found only a disordered house and an empty stable.

"Will they catch him?"

"Depends how hard they try, and that will probably depend on Mr. Haslem."

"Nothing will get done then. After all, you can't expect a man to parade in front of the world with horns on his head."

"That means Miss Thorn will never be publicly cleared."

"You can leave that to me. I'll see the story's put about where it matters."

And I knew I could indeed leave it to him. The gossip from the stables gets up to the drawing room and down again as quickly as we can put out an edition of our paper. When the governess walked up the aisle with her employer, there'd be nobody whispering murder. I never heard the report of that event because Harry had moved on long before it could happen. Two things, though, I did hear. One was that Miss Thorn came into Harry's yard, looking by his account "like a linnet let out of a cage," and thanked him and me most warmly. The other was that Mr. Haslem bought the bay pony for his son at a price ten guineas over what Harry should have had the nerve to ask for it. I like to think that was a sign of gratitude as well. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE FRUIT CELLAR

by Barbara Owens

The bones were unearthed on a July afternoon so hot that nothing alive moved if it didn't have to. Even trees drooped, stoic, waiting for a breeze that might or might not come.

Sheriff Carroll Farmer slid gingerly onto the vinyl-covered seat of his county car, cursing softly at the need to haul himself out into the open. But one of the honchos brought in to run the new automobile assembly plant was putting in a swimming pool, and the excavation crew had uncovered human bones. Resigned, Farmer adjusted his sunglasses and kicked the A/C into high.

The small town of Wayside cooked under its blue metal sky. Its rolling southern fringe, where the new upscale development lay, looked deceptively green and cool under tall old trees. The house in question was an imposing white brick, and near the foot of its sweeping back lawn was a large raw hole. The sheriff recognized all the work crew lounging in the shade. Laid out carefully on a

©1997 by Barbara Owens

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tarp in the grass was a display of yellowish bones. Farmer and the crew foreman, Don Anderson, squatted beside them, wiping sweat.

"Well, they're not recent, they're old," Farmer observed with some relief.

Anderson grunted assent. "Been there for years, looks like. Didn't find any clothing. Prob'ly rotted away."

Without touching it, the sheriff studied a skull crusted with dirt. "Not a whole body here."

"I shut down soon as the scoop brought these up," Anderson said. "Called you right away."

"You did the right thing."

"You suppose we've hit on an old cemetery?"

"I tend to doubt it," Farmer said. "This was all King land out here. They're buried in town."

He took a pen from his shirt pocket and inserted it into an eyehole, tipping the skull slightly on its side. There was a round opening near its base.

"I'm going to call the coroner, Don. See that hole? What do you think?"

Anderson squinted. He whistled softly. "I think it looks like a bullet hole."

"I think so, too. We'd better get Doc Ebenshaw out here before we do anything else."

He radioed the coroner's office from his car. Then he walked across the back lawn to introduce himself to the woman watching anxiously from the patio. Her name was Thorne, Virginia Thorne, she told him. She was his age, fortyish, a soft blonde with a worried frown.

"The county coroner's on his way, Mrs. Thorne. I'll know more once he takes a look. We haven't got a complete body yet so we may have to do more digging. I hope you understand this is police business now."

She sighed. "Just so it doesn't take too long. My husband will be

"I keep being drawn to write about small towns," says California resident Barbara Owens, "perhaps because I was raised in one. I can't seem to resist burying volatility under those seemingly placid surfaces." In her new story Ms. Owens reaches back eighty years, to a time when a small town really was, usually, a safe and placid place.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

disappointed if he doesn't get his pool in as soon as possible."

Farmer gave her a smile. "We'll try not to inconvenience you more than we have to."

"I understand," she said, trying to look like she meant it. "I guess I'll just have to get used to the Midwest. We don't usually find bodies in our backyards where I come from."

The sheriff expanded his smile and made it kindly. "Well, ma'am, I've lived here all my life and this is the first I've found. I don't expect it to happen again."

Doc Ebenshaw arrived, pushing his barrel belly before him as he strolled across the lawn to the pool site, pungently assessing the weather with every step. He examined the bones for several long minutes.

"I'd say fifty years, maybe longer, they've been in the ground," he announced finally. "I'll have to have them tested before I can venture more. But that's a bullet hole in the back of the skull for sure, so we're talking murder. You're not going to try to solve it, are you?"

"Pretty late in the day, I guess," Farmer agreed. "But I'll have to take a crack at it, won't I? That's my job."

Ebenshaw snorted. "It'll be interesting to see how you plan to go about it." He wrapped the bones carefully in the tarp and tucked them under his arm. "I'm off. I'll let you tell the lady of the house that we'll be digging up most of her backyard."

Farmer glanced across at Virginia Thorne waiting impatiently on her patio. No more kindly smiles. It was time to put on his law enforcement hat.

Dee Farmer had prepared a supper of cold fried chicken, potato salad, and homegrown sliced tomatoes. They ate it in the cool of the screened back porch where Carroll popped a beer to toast his wife's wisdom and saintly soul.

"Just tell us about the bones," Dee said. "Everyone's talking about them. We're dying to hear."

The life of a sheriff in a small town was usually a quiet one. People there were the kind who married high-school sweethearts, as he and Dee had, raised their children, went to church on Sundays, and managed the best they could. Dee often joked they were poster images for the family values that Washington politicians treasured so. Even so, Carroll rarely discussed his work at home. But this was an ancient and harmless event. It wouldn't hurt to share it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Raney poked his arm. "Come on, Dad, tell. All the kids want to see those bones."

He grinned at her. "You included? They're just dirty old bones."

"No, I don't want to see them but I'd like to know what happened. I heard there was a hole in the head the size of a fist."

Raney Farmer had turned thirteen that summer, red-haired and freckled like her mother but with the Farmer soft brown eyes. With her older brother off at college, she and her father were getting to know one another better this year. So far he liked everything he learned. It was a little sad for him to watch his skinny-legged tomboy beginning to look like a woman. Life was knocking at her door and he sometimes found himself wondering if he and Dee had done everything they could to prepare her for it. But Raney surprised him more often than not with a maturity of outlook that seemed to come from nowhere. He guessed maybe she was going to do all right.

"Well, if you've got a fist the size of a teeny bullet then I guess you heard right," he teased her.

Her eyes popped. "A bullet hole? No kidding! What else?"

With the reminder that nothing she heard was to travel outside the house walls, he told them everything he knew, next to nothing.

"And I don't know how much more we'll ever find out," he finished over strawberry shortcake. "It happened too long ago."

"I'll bet love was part of it," Raney said. "There's a doomed romance in it somewhere." She was heavily involved with tragic loves that summer, another sure sign she was growing up.

"I tend to doubt that," Farmer answered indulgently. "If it was on Vern King's land it was probably more business-related than love."

"How come?"

"How much do you know about the old King ranch, Raney?"

"Just that one man used to own like most of the county, and that some of our family worked for him."

"That's right. Only almost everybody worked for him in one way or another. His spread was several thousand acres. They say he ran it like a king, too. Hard man to work for, hard man to do business with. He liked to get people indebted to him so he'd have the upper hand. His place wasn't a real ranch like they have out west. It probably got its name because of its size, but it was quite a place. Had a dairy herd, field crops, chickens, a truck farm, orchards. If folks wanted to buy anything or get a job, Vern was the man they had to go to. The town of Wayside proper was just a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bump in the road back then. Few little hardscratch farmers. The King ranch was about all there was."

"Pretty easy to take advantage," Dee observed.

"Well, he did, didn't he? You've heard the stories same as me. It was my great-grandmother Dodd who was raised there," he told Raney. "In the early nineteen hundreds. She grew up in one of Vern's tenant houses."

"And the bones go back that far?" Raney asked.

Farmer pushed away from the table. "Don't know yet." He reached out and gently pinched her sunburned nose. "I'll keep you informed, okay?"

On the following morning, the sheriff was visited bright and early by Roger Thorne. Thorne was not pleased that his new pool would be delayed.

"Is there anything I can do about this?" he inquired. "Workmen were out there at first light today, digging all over the place. You people are ruining my yard."

"Believe me, I'm sorry to trouble you," Farmer assured him. "We'll be out of your way as soon as we can."

He knew it was an inconvenience, both for himself and for the Thornes. A lot of fuss over very old bones.

He got a mid-morning call from the coroner's office. Preliminary testing suggested the bones were male, adult, probably close to six feet in height. At least fifty years old, possibly closer to one hundred. Ebenshaw would keep him posted.

It was a slow day for law enforcement, so Farmer drove back out to the site after lunch. Another steam bath had set in, humidity plastering clothes to skin and making it hard to breathe. When Farmer arrived, ducking under the yellow police tape, the crew was stretched out in the grass under the trees. They were all working barechested. The hole was significantly wider and deeper, and another tarp held new bones. Don Anderson rose to greet him.

"Tried to call you but your office said you were already on the way. Got a surprise for you."

"What's up?"

"Come over here." The two men stood over the tarp looking down at the yellowed bones. Anderson pointed. "See that one? Unless the guy we dug up yesterday had three legs, we've got part of another body. That's a femur, and we've already got two of those."

"My God," Farmer said. "Maybe we *have* gotten into an old

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cemetery or something. Even a murder victim had to be buried somewhere."

"Then where are the coffins?" Anderson reasoned. "We're coming across a few rotten pieces of wood, but they're not right for a coffin. Come on. They're piled over here."

Farmer followed him to take a look. "You're right. That's heavy timber, more like support beams or something."

"That's what I thought," Anderson agreed.

"Okay, I'll give Ebenshaw another call. Better look into the court records, too, see if I can find some trace of this guy."

There were no signs of Virginia Thorne that day. She was probably already packing to return to more gentle surroundings.

Raney started in as soon as they sat down to eat. "Know what I did today? I went to the library and Mrs. Beecham showed me a book that the county historical society wrote a long time ago. It's all in there, Dad, all about the Kings. Lots about them, because they were so important, I guess."

"Yes, they were. Important and powerful."

"There were pictures, too, of the ranch and the people. That place was big! But there were only the two of them—Vern and his daughter, Elizabeth. The book said Elizabeth's mother died when she was born. I saw a wedding picture of Elizabeth and a man named Wesley Burdette. She wasn't much to look at, but she sure was rich. I'll bet that's why he married her, huh?"

"As a matter of fact, I seem to remember there was talk of that," her father acknowledged. "But that could have been all it was, talk. I don't know much about this Burdette."

"That's because he died young. The book said he was hurt in an accident not very long after they got married. Then he lingered for a while and died. That's what the book said, 'lingered.' "

Farmer eyed his daughter's flushed face. "Hey, babe," he said gently, "you're getting pretty caught up in this, aren't you?"

"Sure. It's fun. A real murder in Wayside, even if it happened in the olden days."

"Well, since I expect you'll hear it anyway, I might as well tell you. The men digging out there found parts of another body today."

His wife stopped eating with her fork halfway to her lips. "Another? Was it murdered, too?" Raney grinned wide.

"Don't know yet. Have to find the rest of it. But this is getting a little weird. They found some rotting timbers, too, and that's got

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

me thinking. Looked like the kind of shoring my grandmother had in her fruit cellar."

Raney leaned forward. "What's a fruit cellar?"

"A lot of the old-time houses around here had them. That was before refrigeration, kid. You dig a room underground, usually under a building, just dirt packed solid. Then you store fruits and vegetables down there. The building on top protects it from the sun and the cool dirt underground keeps things fresh longer. But you'd have to shore it up to keep it from caving in, and that's what those pieces of wood reminded me of today. Besides, who'd tear down a building and bury the lumber? Now I remember when the big house was still standing; it was just about where the Thornes' house is now. As much produce as Vern King had on that place, he must have needed a fruit cellar. So it seems to me that might be an easy place to bury a body, under a plain dirt floor."

Raney laughed. "I knew you'd figure things out. Two bodies—cool! Now all we have to know is who did what to who?"

Farmer glanced helplessly at his wife. She shrugged. It was hard to stop Raney once she got started.

Over the next several days the sheriff went to the library and pored over the historical society's book. The Kings and their ranch occupied a good portion of it. Vern was pictured in the hayfields, staring dourly at the camera from atop a horse, and posed stiffly in a rigid-backed chair on the big house's front porch. Elizabeth and Wesley Burdette posed for a wedding portrait. Wesley had a round face and bushy moustache; Elizabeth was a younger version of the big-boned, plain woman he remembered from his youth. As Raney observed, not much to look at. One picture drew his special attention—a group of men standing in front of a shed sitting under a huge catalpa tree. On one side of the shed a slanted doorway could be seen at the base of the wall, leading underground. He'd bet his hat it was a fruit cellar. Didn't prove a thing, but there it was.

Nothing turned up in the county court records regarding a murder or trial connected to the King ranch during that period. Nobody local reported missing. The trail was getting colder all the time.

Doc Ebenshaw called to say the bones had to be between seventy-five and one hundred years old. It was a man, all right, and he added a surprise. That third femur might belong to a woman, and he'd wager she was a young one. He'd be back in touch.

One morning Farmer was buttonholed by Roy Cullen on his way

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out of the office. Cullen had been Wayside's only banker back in the old days. Retired now, he was still sharp in his late seventies, and after inquiring after Farmer's family, he said, "I hear you've got a problem on your hands with those bones found out on the old King ranch."

"Afraid I have," Farmer said. "It all happened too long ago."

"You know, I've been remembering some of the stories my Uncle John told me when I was a boy. He worked out there for years, you know. I recall a man named Murphy he told me about. Came through here about nineteen ten, nineteen fifteen, and hired on with Vern. Lots of fellas did that back then, worked a season or two and drifted on. Uncle John said Vern took to Murphy and pretty soon set him up as a kind of foreman. He was a good worker, Uncle John said, but slick as a snake. Some of the men thought he was stealing from Vern—tools, money, anything he could get his hands on—but no one said anything. They figured Vern deserved it. Well sir, one morning Murphy simply wasn't around anymore. Vern said he'd moved on and that's all there was to it. But my uncle always kind of wondered if Vern caught Murphy at his game and did away with him. Uncle John said Vern always swore he'd kill any man he caught cheating him and to hell with the law."

"You don't say," Farmer said.

"It's only a story, you understand."

"Anyone know where this Murphy came from?"

"Not that I know. Things were different back then, Carroll. People could come and go and not leave a trace."

"Doesn't give me much to go on, does it?"

The older man smiled. "That's a fact. But I thought I'd tell you, maybe set your mind at ease. Could be whoever those bones belong to, it isn't to one of ours."

"You know," Farmer said, "I only remember the place when it was going downhill. Wish I'd seen it in its day."

"It was a big operation. You had family out there, didn't you?"

"Yeah, my great-grandma Berniece Dodd worked in the kitchen. Her little sister Callie did, too, until Callie left town. I never heard too much about it, though. Just that it was a hard life."

Cullen nodded. "It was that. Vern was hard on everyone except Elizabeth, and he spoiled her to death. Gave that girl everything she wanted without batting an eye. Never gave her any common sense, though. After he died she didn't have a notion as to how to run the place. I don't know how many times I called her in to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bank and tried to give her advice on how to handle her money. This was when she was older and was letting the place go piece by piece. But Elizabeth never listened to anyone. Went her own way until it was all gone, and that's why she's where she is today."

Farmer said, "Somebody told me the man she married died young."

"Wesley Burdette. It was common knowledge he married her for the money. Uncle John said she had her head set on marrying him, though, so I suppose old Vern took care of it. Wesley fell off a haywagon. He might have been a son-in-law but Vern saw to it that he earned his keep. They hadn't been married but a year or so when it happened. Wagon ran over him and mashed him up pretty good. Paralyzed him from the neck down. He hung on a few years after, Elizabeth waiting on him hand and foot. Not a good way for a man to go. I don't believe Elizabeth ever got over it."

"Well," the sheriff said, "thanks for telling me, Roy. Gives me something to go on."

"You're more than welcome." Cullen smiled. "So are all these new people moving in for the auto plant keeping you busy?"

"Not too bad so far. I expect it'll pick up."

"I don't like to see the old town change, do you? I kind of liked it the way it was."

Farmer grinned. "I used to know every face I met. There was just us and that seemed right."

"The price of progress," the older man said.

"Yeah, right."

He got a call on his car radio a few minutes later. Another skull had been found, crushed by heavy blows, several of them, it appeared. Also the remains of a pair of shoes, women's shoes.

Raney was delighted with all the news. "I knew it! There's a doomed romance somewhere. What if Elizabeth and this Murphy fell in love? But Vern wouldn't allow it so he killed Murphy. Dad, we've got to find out!"

Her father cocked an eyebrow at her. "We? I don't remember appointing you deputy, kid. This is *my* job."

Raney shrugged it off. "I figure if I help you crack the case you'll give me a medal or something. I'll go over very big at school."

Farmer appealed to his wife. "'Crack the case'? What are you teaching my daughter? Shouldn't she be learning to bake cookies or something?"

Dee was deep in thought. "Two questions," she said. "One, why

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

weren't the bones all together? Why were they spread out?"

"Slippage," he told her. "Don Anderson explained that ground shifts some over long periods of time. But everything was found close enough together to indicate they were buried about the same place and about the same time." He shot a grin at Raney. "What does that do to your doomed romance theory, hotshot? How does the woman figure in?"

"I haven't figured that out yet," she responded airily. "Give me time, I will."

"Okay, second question," Dee said. "Why bury them both in the fruit cellar? With all the open land on that ranch, why not somewhere away from the main buildings?"

"I thought of that," Farmer said. "And I don't have an answer. Maybe 'open land' is the key. That was a working spread, dug up and replanted all the time. Bodies might get uncovered. Even animals could do it. Who's going to dig up a fruit cellar?"

Dee nodded. "Okay, I'll buy that."

"This is so great," Raney beamed. "I wish I could tell someone. I know," she added quickly as both parents opened their mouths. "I know I can't. I just wish I could, that's all."

That night, in bed, Dee said, "You'd really like to solve this thing, wouldn't you?"

"Sure I would. But I know I won't. Nothing to go on. Just old stories and opinions." He was quiet for a moment. "Maybe I shouldn't have let Raney in on so much. Maybe she's too young. Might leave a bad impression on her."

"Oh, I don't think so," she assured him. "She's exposed to worse things in the movies and on TV. She doesn't know those people, Carroll. And it happened so long ago. She's just caught up in the mystery of it. Like solving a puzzle."

He was almost asleep when she said, "Why don't you talk to your mom about it? Maybe she remembers some of the stories handed down from Berniece."

"I've been thinking about that. I've already heard them all, as far as I know, but I guess it's worth a try."

Ruth Farmer was on her hands and knees weeding her vegetable garden when the sheriff arrived. They retired to the back porch for iced tea.

"I'd like to ask you something, Mom," Farmer said after a few minutes of casual conversation. "You know about the bones found out at the old King place?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes." His mother sipped her tea. "A terrible thing."

"Now I know nobody expects me to find out what happened that far back. I'll have to close it unresolved. But I can't help feeling curious. Do you remember anything Grandma or Great-grandma Berniece ever told you that might shed some light?"

His mother's rocker stopped rocking. "Why, Carroll, that was years and years ago."

"I know that. But I could use your help if you've got it to give."

She looked at him for a long minute, then at her lap, finally into the sunny backyard. "When do you think this happened?"

"We can't pin it down too close. Maybe about nineteen fifteen or so, close to the time Callie left. I know I've heard all the old stories, but—"

"No," his mother said. "Not all of them." Slowly, she began to rock again, her eyes on him. "Some of the stories I was told swore me to secrecy, Carroll. Nobody but my grandmother, my mother, and I knew. You never heard those stories."

He stared at her. "Do you know what happened out there?"

Her mouth set. "I know what I was told. In nineteen sixteen Grandma Berniece worked in the kitchen at the big house, along with her sister, Callie. Grandma was twenty-one and Callie was seventeen."

"Callie, the black sheep," he said to prompt her.

His mother shook her head. "Let's say she was foolish."

She paused for so long he thought she had changed her mind and was not going to tell him. Then she drew a deep breath. "Grandma never knew for sure what happened, understand. Nothing she could prove. But she had a pretty good idea."

On the following morning, Sheriff Farmer shut down the digging on the Thorne place and promised the family that the county would cover the cost of repair. After conferring with Doc Ebenshaw, he marked the case officially unresolved. He took his wife out for lunch, explained the situation, and received her cooperation. That night he told Raney at supper. His daughter's face paled with shock.

"You're just giving up?"

"It's a waste of my time, Raney. I have other things to do. It's too late to find the answers. I'm sorry, but that's the way it has to be."

"But look at all we've found out so far!" she protested. "You can't give up yet. If you're busy I can ask around, talk to people—"

"You won't do anything," he interrupted sharply. "I don't want

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you nosing around bothering people. You're too young to understand, honey, so you'll have to trust me. That case is over."

Raney was on her feet, eyes blazing. "I'm *not* too young! And I'm not a quitter, either. That's what you are, just a damn quitter!"

She was gone before he could answer, slamming out of the house. The sheriff looked across the table at his wife.

"That hurt. My daughter thinks I'm a quitter."

"She doesn't understand, hon. She'll get over it."

"Maybe."

"There's only one other way," Dee said after a long silence.

"Is it that important? Would it be right?"

"You have to decide that, Carroll. But I'll go along with whatever you say."

Raney was polite but cool as she and her father headed out of town in the family car. The weather had turned kinder, providing them with a light breeze that rippled through green fields as they passed.

"It would be nice if I knew where we were going," she said after a while.

"Well, I'll tell you where we're going," Farmer said. "We're going to see someone, and after that I'm going to tell you some things. You say you're not too young to tackle hard stuff so I'm going to take you up on that. Your mom and I talked it over and it's okay with her."

She couldn't hide the spark of interest. "Who are we going to see?"

He watched her while he told her. "We're going to visit Miss Elizabeth, Vern King's daughter."

Her head whipped toward him, eyes wide. "That Elizabeth? Is she alive? I didn't know she was still alive."

"She's alive. She's ninety-seven years old and lives in a nursing home outside Durbin. That's where we're headed."

Raney broke out in a sunny smile. "Well, why didn't you say so before? She can tell us, we can find out—" Suddenly she broke off. "Ninety-seven? That's old! Is she yucky like Mrs. Miller? I don't know if I—"

"Yes, she's old, and I don't know what you term yucky. But you will be polite and act as though you had a decent upbringing. And Miss Elizabeth won't tell us anything because her mind is failing. I talked to the head nurse yesterday and she tells me Elizabeth has days she remembers things and days she doesn't. Besides, we're not going there to ask her any questions."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Then why are we going?"

"Because I want you to see her before I tell you some things," Farmer said. "Then I hope you'll understand."

His daughter settled back, muttering, "I don't know why nobody told me she was alive."

"I didn't think it was important till now," Farmer said. "She's lived here for a long time, Raney—over twenty years."

She was silent for several miles. "Twenty years *is* a long time."

"It sure is."

Raney waited on a bench in the shade beside a small pond while the sheriff went inside. There were a few ducks skating across the water. She stood when she saw her father pushing a wheelchair toward her. Sitting in the chair was a slumped figure wrapped in shawls. Up close, the figure bore no resemblance to the big strong woman in the historical society's book. This woman's face was filled with wrinkles, her bony hands gnarled and twisted. Only her eyes showed any signs of life.

Farmer stopped her in the shade beside the bench. "Miss Elizabeth, this is my daughter, Raney. Raney, Miss Elizabeth King."

The old woman stirred before Raney could answer. "My name is Mrs. Wesley Burdette," she corrected in a thin voice. She cocked her head back to glare up at him. "Who are you? I don't know you."

The sheriff smiled. "I came to see you, Miss Elizabeth. I'm a friend."

She studied him suspiciously for a minute before turning her attention to Raney. "What are you standing around for, girl?" she queried sharply. A bony hand shooed her. "Get back to your chores. I don't pay you to dawdle."

Raney's eyes rose to her father's. "Does she think I work for her?" she whispered.

"It's okay," the sheriff said. He sat down on the edge of the bench and pulled the wheelchair close to him. "Miss Elizabeth?" he asked gently. "Look, they gave me some ice cream from the kitchen. They tell me you like ice cream."

"I like ice cream," she said, reaching for it. Farmer placed the cup and spoon into her hand.

"Can she eat it by herself?" Raney asked, still whispering.

"They say she can," her father answered, and slowly the old woman began ladling the melting ice cream into her mouth.

Raney stood frozen to her spot. "Oh, Dad, she's so sad."

He nodded at the grass at the foot of the wheelchair. "Come sit

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

over here." Haltingly, Raney sank down cross-legged at Miss Elizabeth's feet.

The old woman seemed to have forgotten them as she concentrated on her ice cream. Two ducks squawked in dispute out on the pond. She raised her eyes to watch them.

"Ducks," she said.

Raney smiled up at her. "Yes. It's a pretty day to be outside, isn't it, Miss Elizabeth? The sky's so blue. It matches your shawl. That's a pretty shawl."

The old woman glanced down sharply. "Do I know you? Who are you?"

"That's my daughter," Farmer said quickly. "Raney. Remember? I introduced you to her before."

Miss Elizabeth didn't reply. Her attention wandered out across the grounds, and in a few minutes her eyelids fluttered and closed.

Raney waited for several minutes before she spoke. "I still don't understand why you brought me here," she said softly.

"I wanted you to meet her before we talked," Farmer said. "We'll sit a few more minutes and then we'll go."

"Okay. I really don't like it here much." She flashed him a small smile. "I'd rather be back in Wayside."

"Wayside?" Miss Elizabeth's eyes were open, blinking. "Wayside is mine. I live there."

"We live there, too," the sheriff told her. "My daughter and me."

"I don't know you," she accused him, her voice rising.

Farmer reached out to take one of her twisted old hands. "No, but you knew some of my family," he said soothingly. "A long time ago. The Dodds. They used to live on your place. Berniece worked in the kitchen and—"

A tremor shook the shawls. Miss Elizabeth's gaze sharpened and focused on him. She flung his hand away. "Berniece Dodd? I know Berniece. I know that Callie, too, but she's dead because I killed her. Good riddance, if you ask me."

Neither Farmer moved. The sheriff heard Raney's quick intake of breath but he dared not risk a glance at her. Miss Elizabeth was staring directly at him.

"Why'd you do that, Miss Elizabeth?" he asked carefully.

"That girl tried to steal Wesley," she said petulantly. She was looking at him, but she was gone somewhere all alone. "Comes to me, the little snip, and says they love each other, she and Wesley. They're going to go away and get married, not a thing I can do about it. Tells me they've been meeting secretly all the time he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

courted me. Sassed me when I said I'd see her dead first. Out back, late one night. I was sitting on the porch steps, too hot to sleep, and she comes waltzing by, says she's just left Wesley. So I picked up that big iron poker hanging there and smacked her with it, smacked her until she stopped moving."

She stopped. Farmer didn't move. Then slowly, Miss Elizabeth began to smile.

"Now I'd just seen all that new dirt dug up in the fruit cellar a few days before. Papa caught a man named Murphy stealing and he said he ran Murphy off. He said he'd been digging in the fruit cellar because there were moles down there and he was burying poison. Well, I thought I knew better. Papa said people who steal from you ought to be killed, so I thought he probably killed Murphy and buried him down cellar. That's why I took Callie there, where the ground was already soft. I dug almost all night to get her deep enough so she wouldn't smell. Thought she could steal Wesley from me, what an idea."

The old woman stopped again, but still neither Raney nor her father dared move. Gradually, the old woman's face softened.

"Poor Wesley. I told him I sent Callie packing so he'd see no more of her. He cried, Wesley did, said he was sorry, he'd lost his head, but that I was the one he truly loved and wanted to marry. So I forgave him." Somewhere deep in the folds of shawl a small rusty cackling rose. "I used to think about it sometimes when he was working in Papa's toolshed. He didn't know he was walking on Callie." Quick tears welled in her eyes. "My poor Wesley. Taken before his time, but it was me he loved to the end, not Callie. It was me."

This time when she paused she did not continue. Her gaze went out across the pond and into another time.

Farmer reached for Raney and she wasn't too old to let him put his arms around her. Together, they walked to the bank of the little pond.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

"I guess so," was the faint answer. "I never expected that, did you?"

"Not in a minute, or I never would have brought you here," he said fiercely. "Honey, I'm sorry. I wanted you to see how she was before I told you what I suspected."

"Was that it? What you suspected?"

"Yeah, but I only had guesses. See, I found out that Callie told her sister, Great-grandma Berniece, about her and Wesley, but it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was a secret. Then when Callie supposedly took off, Berniece was afraid to say anything. She thought Miss Elizabeth had found out and done something to her but she couldn't prove it. All she knew was that Callie wouldn't just go away without telling her."

Raney glanced back at the old woman sitting quietly in her chair. "They were all awful people, weren't they? Vern and Elizabeth, even Wesley. He never loved Elizabeth, he loved Callie." She managed a small grin. "So I was right, after all. It *did* have to do with a doomed romance."

Farmer hugged her. "Yes, I guess it did."

"What are you going to do now?"

This was the conversation he had been waiting for, but he'd come to it from a different direction than planned.

"You have to help me decide that, Raney. See, there were two murders out there at the King ranch and now we know who did them. But everyone's gone except Miss Elizabeth, and look how she is. Raney, this has been a secret in my family for three generations. And I don't know how we'd track this man Murphy down. I guess I'm wondering what good it would do to get this out in the open now. How will it help anyone? You understand what I'm saying?"

She thought about it for a long while. "I think I do," she said finally. "We still don't have any proof. Just Miss Elizabeth's word, and she probably won't remember it again tomorrow. And you couldn't very well send her to prison, could you?" She glanced up at him. "Maybe someday we can tell, after she's gone."

He nodded down at her. "Maybe."

She managed a faint grin. "And maybe not. Callie was ours, after all, and now we know what happened to her. It's really nobody else's business, is it?"

"My feeling exactly," her father said. "It'd just stir things up. Raney Farmer, you're going to be okay."

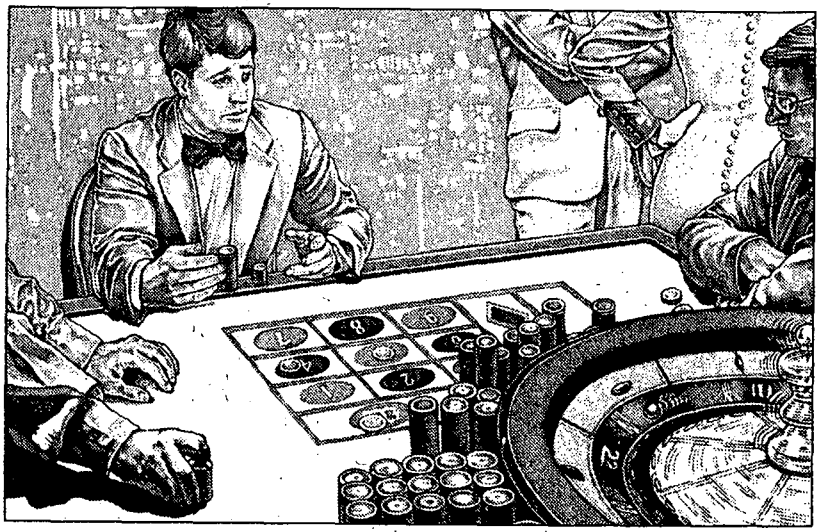
"But you know what?" she said. "I got hungry watching her scarf up that ice cream. You think we could stop on the way home and get some of our own?"

"Not a bad idea. I'll even buy."

A sound from the wheelchair behind them. Miss Elizabeth was beckoning.

"You there!" she called in her scratchy voice. "You come over here and take me back to the house. I've got things to do. My Wesley will be wanting his supper." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Ron Chironna

GAMES OF CHANCE

by Clark Howard

The man standing before a floor-to-ceiling window of an eighty-first-floor apartment in the Prudential Tower was lean, almost handsome, but at the moment wearing an expression that was worn, weary. It was almost dawn in Chicago, a wet, misty April morning. As he looked out over Lake Michigan, watching the day's first light break grayly on the black expanse of water, his eyes reflected perplexity. A single thought plagued him.

How much longer, he wondered, *can it go on?*

A voice behind him asked, "Is that it for tonight, Mr. Harvard?"

James Harvard turned from the window. He was in a large, luxuriously appointed living room, in one corner of which was a custom-built octagonal poker table with an array of leather chips and playing cards on the green felt top. Four men, in various stages of weariness, sat at the table. Three of the men looked, respectively, incredulous, victorious, and embarrassed. The fourth, a profes-

©1997 by Clark Howard

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sional gambler, was merely inscrutable. It was this man who had asked the question.

"Yes, I think that's it for tonight," Harvard answered. "What's my tab?"

"One hundred fifty-six thousand," said the gambler.

Harvard gestured to one of two room stewards who worked for the professional gambler, and the steward brought him his suit coat and held it for Harvard to put on. From an inside pocket, Harvard produced a checkbook and a Mont Blanc and stepped over to the room's serving bar to write the check. As usual, he left the payee line blank.

"I've never seen a run of bad luck like that in my life," he heard the incredulous player say from the table. *You don't know the half of it,* Harvard thought wryly.

"We never should have let the betting get so high," said the embarrassed player.

"Forget it," said Harvard, turning from the bar with the check. "In every game of chance, there has to be at least one loser. It just so happens that in this particular game, I was the *only* loser. Fortunes of poker."

"That's the spirit, Jim," said the third player, who had the most chips in front of him. He laughed a little too loudly, adding, "Hell, if I had your money, I'd throw mine away!"

Harvard handed the check to the gambler, who ran the game and would be paying off the winners. The gambler studied it for a moment with pursed lips. "I hope there won't be any problem with this, Mr. Harvard," he said quietly. "It's a rather large check—"

"Would you like me to write you a dozen small ones?" Harvard asked drily.

"That's what I like about you, Jim," said the victorious player. "No matter how much you lose, you can still joke about it."

"Next to my ability at cards, I'm most noted for my sense of

"Clark Howard's concerns are for the outcast, the minority, the prisoner," writes Ed Hoch in *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers*. "He has a deep interest in convicts and ex-convicts, a theme that runs through his writing." That's why the splendidly developed upper-class hero of this new Howard story is a departure. But Mr. Howard has us rooting for him all the way.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

humor," Harvard replied with a slight, sardonic smile. He slipped his arms into a tan London Fog the steward was holding. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said, and left.

On the way down in the elevator, Harvard said to the uniformed operator, "I'll bet you twenty dollars that we stop at least twice before we reach the garage."

The operator, a black man with processed hair and knowing eyes, glanced at his wrist watch and said, "All right, sir, I'll take that bet." Smiling, he added, "There'll be a blond hooker leaving about now, on fifty. After that, it should be nonstop to the garage."

At fifty, the car stopped and the blonde got on. She was one of those soft blondes, smart-looking in an Antonio Fusco cashmere suit, carrying a Prada shoulder bag. She smiled briefly at Harvard but did not flirt.

After the elevator reached the parking garage without another stop, Harvard waited until the blonde got off, then peeled a twenty from the money-clipped fold of currency in his pocket and handed it to the operator, saying, "Thanks for the action."

"My pleasure, sir," the operator replied.

By the time Harvard got to his gun-metal gray Jaguar, the blonde was already driving out in a white Mercedes. Harvard got into the Jag, but before starting the engine, he took a moment to rest his head back against the cold leather seat and wondered, *How did it get this bad? How did it go this far?* He thought of the racetracks, the billiard matches, the lottery tickets, the trips to Atlantic City, the football and baseball and basketball and hockey games, the boxing matches that the wrong fighter won. And the illegal poker and dice games played in plush apartments high above the city. *Four million,* he thought, *in less than a year.* Almost his entire inheritance. It was unreal.

Finally starting the car, he drove up to street level, exited into a misting rain, and turned onto Lake Shore Drive, heading north toward the wealthy suburbs.

James Harvard's background was wealthy upper class: the North Shore old money of Wilmette, Winnetka, and Glencoe. His family had been in textiles for four generations; there were branches of Harvard Mills throughout the Midwest and South. His education had been premium: Mason Foster Prep School, a bachelor's in business administration from Notre Dame, a master's in the same field from Northwestern, never once abandoning solid Midwestern values for Eastern pomposity.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In school, Harvard's grades had never fallen below B. He had belonged to all the right clubs while politely declining fraternity invitations. He had been a very good tennis player, thanks to an excellent backhand; a fair boxer, because he was fast on his feet; and a poor soccer player, due to his tendency to forget and grab the ball with both hands. He spoke fluent Spanish and French, the former learned in school, the latter from a family maid twelve years his senior who taught him many other things as well.

All in all, James Harvard's manners were cultivated, his tastes impeccable, his social demeanor flawless, his family credentials enviable, and his future thought to be as solid as Gibraltar. At the age of thirty, he should already have taken his place alongside his two older brothers at the executive offices of Harvard Mills. He had not done so because of a single flaw in his character.

James Harvard was an obsessive gambler.

Harvard arrived at the palatial family mansion, which occupied a large promontory on the North Shore of Lake Michigan, just before eight, with the misting rain breaking and a morning sun lighting up the first new greenery of the year. He could have left his Jag at the front door and a servant would have moved it for him, but he chose to drive around to the rear ten-car garage and enter through the grand kitchen that served four separate family wings of the mansion. André, the French chef, was at a long grill, about to begin cracking eggs from a bowl on the counter.

"Hold it," said Harvard. "I'll bet you twenty that the yolk of the first egg you crack is smaller than a half dollar."

André glanced around cautiously; there was a household rule that domestic and culinary staff were not allowed to gamble with the youngest Harvard brother. But after examining the egg with a critical eye, André said, "It's a bet."

The egg was cracked onto the grill and Harvard held a half-dollar over its yolk. The yolk was discernibly larger. Harvard slipped the chef a twenty. Just then, Marie, André's wife and the head housekeeper, emerged from the pantry. "What are you two doing?" she asked suspiciously. This would not be the first time she had caught them gambling.

"We are discussing eggs," André replied innocently.

Harvard winked at André, patted Marie on a plump cheek, and left the kitchen.

In the mansion's sunny breakfast room, overlooking the lake, Harvard found his two older brothers, John and William. John

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was now chairman of the board and president of Harvard Mills, and William was executive vice president and chief executive officer. Each of them was at his own end of the table, sipping orange juice and reading the *Wall Street Journal,* while their respective wives got their respective children ready for school in their respective wings of the mansion.

"Good morning, brothers," said Harvard. He poured himself a cup of coffee from a nearby serving table. "How's the price on Harvard Mills this morning?"

The brothers exchanged quick glances. "Up an eighth," said John. "Why?"

"I'm thinking about selling a block."

"How large a block?" William asked, a little uneasily.

"Pretty large," said Harvard. Joining them at the table, he looked steadily at each brother in turn. "In fact, all I've got left."

The brothers shook their heads in unison. "James, James, James," said John with a sigh. "Why do you let yourself do these things?"

"What you're really asking is why I'm not like you and Willie—excuse me, I mean William. Can't call a chief executive officer Willie." Harvard took a quick sip of coffee, burning his tongue slightly. "I don't *know* why I'm not like you two, John. But I'm not. Maybe you two got all the good genes in the family; maybe there weren't any left for me."

"That's nonsense and you know it," snapped William. "You're every bit as capable and competent as we are. If you'd just make an effort to control that damned gambling habit!"

"I *have* made an effort!" Harvard snapped back. "I've made a number of efforts. I just—I can't seem to resist it. The turn of a card, the spin of a wheel, pitch of a baseball, two men in the ring, a new filly on a fast track." He leaned forward on the table, a sudden urgency in his expression. "It's like being in love with a woman you know is no good for you. She's the worst thing that can ever happen to you, and the blackest day of your life was the day you met her. But you've *got* to have her—no matter what the consequences." Sighing quietly, he sat back. "Do you want the stock?"

"James, let us make you an interest-free loan so that you won't relinquish part-ownership of the mills," suggested William. But Harvard was already shaking his head.

"No. I want out, Willie. If I'm going to ruin my life, I want to do it with my own money. Thanks anyway." He turned to John. "Do you want the stock?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Of course," said the elder brother. "We never want family stock sold to outsiders. I'll take half and William will take half. Are you sure you want to sell *all* you've got left?"

"Yes. What'll it come to, roughly?"

William took a wafer-thin calculator from his vest pocket and began entering figures. "If I recall correctly, you have seven thousand shares left. At the current market value of fifty-one, it comes to three hundred fifty-seven thousand."

Harvard nodded slowly. After he deposited a hundred fifty-six thousand to cover the check he had written earlier, he would have just over two hundred thousand left. Rising from the table, he forced himself to keep his shoulders back and chin up. "Can you draw up the transfer today?"

"Of course, Jim. I'll have everything ready by noon in our Loop office."

The servants began bringing breakfast to his two brothers, so Harvard excused himself and walked through the mansion to his own small wing and into his bedroom. Getting down his matched Hartmann luggage, he began to bring clothes out of his closet to pack. All the time he was thinking: *Where shall I go with the two hundred thousand I have left?* The names of cities flashed into his mind. London. Monte Carlo. Nassau. Las Vegas.

He smiled to himself. Why not decide by chance? From a desk drawer in his adjoining study, he took a deck of his personal, high-quality, monogrammed playing cards, leather encased. Without sitting down, he began to deal the cards one by one, facedown, into four talons, or stacks. Mentally, he designated the talons alphabetically, from left to right, as Las Vegas, London, Monte Carlo, and Nassau. When each talon had thirteen cards in it, he began turning them up, one at a time across the board. Ace of spades takes it, he decided.

The ace of spades showed up on talon number three. Monte Carlo.

Harvard returned to his bedroom and resumed packing.

At six that evening, Harvard was comfortably settled in a first-class seat on an Air France 747 about to depart Chicago's O'Hare Airport for Nice, France. In a zippered pocket of the carry-on bag at his feet was a certified cashier's check for $201,000—the last of what had once been a considerable inheritance and interest in Harvard Mills.

Sipping a martini before takeoff, Harvard became aware of a whip-thin woman with burnished red hair who entered the cabin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with a group of several others, all taking seats in a section across the aisle from him. The redhead was vaguely familiar but he could not quite place her. She was expensively dressed in an Eric Bergere pantsuit for traveling, and had on a pair of Ferragamo boots which she unzipped and removed as soon as she sat down directly across from Harvard. He turned his attention away from her, but presently became aware that she was staring at him.

"Excuse me," she said, "but haven't we met?"

"That's supposed to be the man's line," Harvard said, looking over at her again.

She shrugged. "Okay, you use it."

Suppressing a smile, Harvard said, "Excuse me, but haven't we met?"

Tilting her chin up slightly, she looked down her nose at him and replied aloofly, "I can't imagine where." Then she laughed a throaty laugh. "You're James Harvard, aren't you? I'm Adriana Marshall—"

"Of course," said Harvard. "Henry Marshall's daughter. Our fathers were friends. You and your family were at some charity event at our place five or six years ago."

"Yes. It was for St. Jude's Children's Hospital, I think." She paused a beat, then said, "We were all terribly sorry to hear about your father's heart attack."

"That's kind of you. Your parents are well, I trust."

"After a fashion," Adriana said, raising one eyebrow. "They're divorced. Mother is in Buenos Aires with some lothario she met in San Juan last year. Father is in robust good health, still single-handedly running Marshall Chemicals, which, as I'm sure you know, is the oldest and most reliable manufacturer of household cleaning products in America. When you use a Marshall product, you help stamp out grime."

"I use them all, faithfully, every day," Harvard assured her.

A cabin attendant brought Adriana a cocktail and she and Harvard touched glasses across the aisle. "Are you on your way to the film festival?" she asked.

"Film festival? What film festival?"

"The Monaco Film Festival, which you obviously aren't attending."

"No," Harvard replied, frowning slightly. "I didn't even realize it was being held."

A tall man, handsome except for a somewhat slack jaw, came up and said, "Adriana, darling, come on back here. There's a vacant seat and Buffy's getting up a trivia contest."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh, good," Adriana said, "I *love* trivia." With her cocktail, and in her stockinged feet, she started down the aisle. "Join us if you like, James," she invited over her shoulder.

"Perhaps later," Harvard said, forcing a smile. Damn, he thought. A stupid film festival. If he had known that was going on, he would have chosen some other place to go to gamble. Instinctively, he hated crowds, hated people standing too close to him, casually brushing up against him. He was convinced that it brought bad luck, and spread germs besides. He made up his mind that if the casino was uncomfortably crowded, he would go on to London and the always tranquil private gaming clubs there.

As he sat finishing his martini, Harvard thought about Adriana Marshall. She had a reputation for being fiercely independent, and was completely liberated. Harvard knew of two serious affairs in which she had been involved, both of which supposedly cost her father considerable sums, and there had been a rumor several years earlier about an abortion. Adriana's upbringing, like his own, had been the finest: finishing school in Virginia, college in Switzerland, art studies in France. In spite of it all, she managed to become involved with chauffeurs, gigolos, and professional rebels of various persuasions. Here she was now, traveling with a group of obviously idle rich, with nothing better to do than take in a foreign film festival.

Certainly not smart like me, he thought. At least he had a *chance* to win. Adriana, he felt, was a born loser.

Before he could analyze the absurdity of his conclusion, the cabin attendant came by to collect his glass and have him fasten his seat belt for takeoff.

By the time the 747 was well airborne, and Harvard had another martini, then hors d'oeuvres and a glass of champagne, then an excellent dinner of veal cutlets with a 1982 Château Margaux, he had been awake for some thirty-two hours and was physically spent. With a set of headphones in place, Mozart sonatas selected on the audio, the volume turned down to its lowest audible level, and a sleep mask on, he closed his eyes and went into a long, deep sleep. By the time he awoke, ten hours of the thirteen-hour flight had passed.

"So you're not dead, after all," Adriana said from across the aisle when he removed the sleep mask.

"I'm not sure yet," Harvard replied. He looked anxiously toward the forward section of the cabin.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It's on the left, and it's unoccupied," Adriana said.

Quickly retrieving his shaving kit from the carry-on, Harvard hurried toward the lavatory.

Fifteen minutes later, he returned, shaved, hair combed, teeth brushed, relieved, and more than ready for the black coffee he was brought.

"Only a person who leads a decadent life can sleep that soundly for that long," Adriana accused lightly.

"Are you speaking from experience?" he asked.

"Definitely. So tell me, since you're not going to Monaco, what are you going to do in Nice?"

"But I am going to Monaco," he said. "I'm just not going for the film festival."

"What then?"

"To gamble."

"Are you serious?"

"Very." His eyes locked onto hers. "You're not the only one who's an embarrassment to their family, Miss Marshall."

Adriana stiffened just enough for it not to go unnoticed. "Exactly what does that mean?" she asked, her voice taking on an edge.

"It means that while you romp around the world spending your father's hard-earned money associating with personality washouts, I squander *my* father's hard-earned money across gambling tables frequented by equally worthless individuals who, like myself, contribute absolutely nothing worthwhile to mankind. We're meaningless, you and I. Totally insignificant. It's interesting that you like trivia so much—because you *are* trivia, just as I am."

Adriana glared at him icily, sculpted lips compressed in anger. "Why don't you go to hell, Harvard," she said tightly.

"All in good time," he replied.

Adriana stalked down the aisle away from him.

The Air France 747 set down at Nice International Airport just before noon. Deplaning, filing through Immigration, claiming baggage, and proceeding through Customs, Harvard and Adriana were never more than thirty feet apart, but they neither spoke nor looked at one another. To a degree, Harvard regretted what he had said to her; it had been boorish and unnecessary, and the only way he could explain it to himself was to rationalize that Adriana lived as she did because she was shallow and without character, while he was in a sense compelled to the life he led by some inner

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

obsession, some psychological addiction over which he had no control, like the weakness that drove an alcoholic. Absent the force that generated his compulsion to gamble, Harvard was certain he would have been every bit the respectable, successful business executive his brothers were. The logic of that reasoning was all that allowed him to keep from despising himself.

As Harvard left the Nice arrivals terminal, he saw Adriana and her group dividing themselves between two gleaming white limousines. Putting the woman and their encounter out of his mind, he boarded a tram with his bags and several minutes later debarked on a rental lot where he signed for a red Audi convertible. Soon he was hugging the coastal road above the Côte d'Azur and the glistening Mediterranean, heading south out of Nice toward Monaco and Monte Carlo. Halfway along on the twenty-mile drive, he passed both white limousines. They had tinted windows, so he could not tell whether Adriana Marshall was looking out at him or not, and in any case he kept his eyes straight ahead. Already Adriana was beginning to move to the back of his mind as he started thinking about the games of chance that awaited him in the great marbled, mirrored, chandeliered casino called Monte Carlo.

Within an hour, Harvard had cruised down the wide, colorful Avenue de Monte Carlo and swung into the entry drive of the magnificent Hôtel de Paris. Crossing the ornate lobby, momentarily crowded with motion picture people between screenings, he was thankful he'd had the foresight to make a confirmed reservation before leaving Chicago, and realized he was fortunate to have found a vacancy at all. As he registered, he said to the desk clerk, "I have a large cashier's check that I'd like to have cleared for casino play as soon as possible."

"Of course, sir. Let me get the concierge for you."

The check was turned over for approval and Harvard given a receipt. "Your funds should be available through the concierge desk by six P.M., Mr. Harvard."

A bellman showed Harvard to a luxurious mini-suite on the third floor, facing the broad boulevard and the shining sea beyond. When he was alone, he stepped out onto his small balcony to look across the street at the casino. A sense of anticipation trickled down his spine and made him shudder slightly. Then he glanced down and saw Adriana Marshall alighting from one of the white limousines at the hotel entrance. At once, his sense of anticipation vanished.

Turning back into the hotel room, Harvard found himself hop-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing that the encounter with Adriana was not going to bring him continued bad luck.

Just after six that evening, fortified by a light, early dinner ordered from room service, Harvard donned what he perceived to be his lucky white dinner jacket and went down to the concierge desk. On duty was an attractive, dark-haired young woman in a black tail coat, pinned to which was a brass name tag reading: GEORGETTE MANON. Identifying himself, Harvard obtained a validated note of credit from the hotel to the casino for twenty thousand American dollars in French francs, with the amount charged against his now-verified credit.

"Good luck at the tables, sir," said Georgette Manon as she handed him the credit note.

"Thank you very much," Harvard replied, pleased. He considered it a good omen to be wished luck by a total stranger.

Crossing the brilliantly lighted Avenue de Monte Carlo, Harvard entered the foyer of the opulent casino, paid his ten-franc entry fee, and proceeded onto the impressive expanse of the casino floor, relieved to see that it was busy but not as overly crowded as the film festival event might have suggested. At a convenient cashier's cage, he changed his note of credit for a rack of thirty-two five-thousand-franc *jetons*, or playing chips. Then, turning to survey the floor, he quickly chose a *boule* table where only one other person was engaged in play.

Boule is a high-risk game of roulette. There are only nine numbers on the wheel. Even numbers—two, four, six, and eight—pay seven-to-one on a bet, as do odd numbers—one, three, seven, and nine. Number five on the wheel takes all bets for the house. Players may also bet red or black, odd or even, or split combinations of two-four-seven-nine or one-three-six-eight.

Harvard played *boule* for nearly an hour and a half, wagering against a short Arab croupier with the name HABIB on his casino badge. First winning, then losing, then winning again, then losing again, Harvard finally began to lose steadily. By seven-thirty, the entire twenty thousand was gone, his *jeton* rack empty.

Returning to the hotel concierge desk, Harvard obtained from Georgette Manon another note of credit for an additional twenty thousand dollars. "Good luck again, monsieur," she said, smiling.

"Thank you again," he said, returning the smile.

Entering the casino again, Harvard saw Adriana Marshall, in a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gold lamé evening gown, playing *boule* at the same table at which he had played earlier. Even sitting in the same chair. And the same short croupier, Habib, was still spinning the wheel. Adriana appeared to be alone, which he found mildly surprising. Quickly ignoring her presence, in case she *was* bad luck, he got his rack of chips and walked into the *Trente-et-Quarante* area and took a seat.

Trente-et-Quarante, or Thirty-and-Forty, is a card game in which 312 cards are dealt a few at a time from a highly polished wooden *sabot,* or shoe. Face cards are considered tens, aces are ones, and all other cards keep their numbered value. The cards are laid out faceup in a single row until the points total at least thirty-one but not more than forty. A second row is then dealt below the first row, again until the point value of the cards reaches thirty-one but no more than forty. Players bet on which row will come closest to thirty-one. They may also bet on *couleur:* that the first card of the first row will be the same color as the first card of the second row; or *inverse:* that the colors will not be the same. All winning bets are paid even money.

Determined to quickly recoup his earlier losses, Harvard bet heavily for a full hour—and for the second time that evening lost his entire rack of chips.

At the concierge desk again, Harvard obtained a note of credit for forty thousand dollars, instead of twenty.

"I do hope monsieur's luck changes," the dark-haired young woman at the desk said, rather self-consciously.

"So do I," Harvard replied curtly.

They did not exchange smiles this time.

Crossing the casino floor for the third time, Harvard noticed that Adriana was still at the same *boule* table, but with a different croupier on duty. He thought nothing of it until he was standing at the cashier's cage getting his chips—a double rack this time. That was when he saw the Arab croupier, Habib, standing nearby, pointing Adriana out to a somewhat flat-faced Anglo with a head of tightly curled black hair, and wearing a leather coat over a turtleneck. The man nodded and surreptitiously passed an envelope to Habib, who quickly put it in his inside coat pocket. Probably some gigolo, Harvard thought, staking out an American rich girl brought to his attention by a casino employee with a profitable little sideline.

With his new chips, Harvard walked over to the Baccarat area, his face set with the grim determination he felt to break his unbe-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lievable losing streak. Settling into one of the plushly upholstered chairs, he began to place conservative bets while getting the feel of the table.

As with *Trente-et-Quarante,* six decks of cards were used in Baccarat. Face cards and tens had values of zero; aces were one point; all other cards counted for their number value. The object of the game was to get as close to nine as possible with either two or three cards. Amounts of ten were subtracted from a player's total. In Harvard's first hand, he was dealt an eight and a nine, for a total of seventeen, minus ten, which gave him a value of seven. He chose not to draw a third card, and lost when the dealer hit a six, a four, and an eight, for a score of eighteen, minus ten, for a winning eight.

That was the first of twenty-four consecutive hands that Harvard lost at Baccarat. On the twenty-fifth hand, he pushed in all the chips he had left, a bet of nearly six thousand dollars, and lost again.

Stunned, he left the table. Walking ahead of him as he approached the foyer was the flat-faced man he had seen having Adriana Marshall pointed out to him by the *boule* croupier. Harvard scarcely noticed him, nor was he aware that Adriana herself was only a dozen yards behind him, also walking toward the foyer.

Outside, as Harvard waited to cross the boulevard back to the Hôtel de Paris, the flat-faced man stopped at the casino entrance and signaled the driver of a Porsche four-seater parked nearby. The Porsche pulled up to the entrance just as Adriana Marshall came out the door.

Traffic on the boulevard stopped and Harvard crossed to the hotel.

Behind him, Adriana Marshall was quickly and quietly forced into the Porsche by the flat-faced man, and the car sped off around the corner, away from the busy boulevard.

At three o'clock the next afternoon, Harvard woke from a drunken sleep with a crushing headache and barely enough strength to make it into the bathroom to gulp down four aspirin, take off the underwear in which he had slept, and stand under a moderately cold shower until his mind began to clear. A while later, in a thick terrycloth hotel robe, he made it out to a couch in the sitting area and began trying to regroup.

On the table in front of him were his canceled notes of credit

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which had, one by one, come back to the hotel concierge for payment. Tallying through them, Harvard learned that his losses for the night totaled one hundred eighty-eight thousand U. S. dollars. Groaning audibly, he rested his head back as the last few hours of the previous evening started surfacing in his memory.

After losing forty thousand dollars at baccarat, he had made his fourth trip to the hotel for another note of credit. "Make this one for the entire amount I have left," he instructed.

"The full one hundred twenty thousand, monsieur?" Georgette Manon asked, with a slight, troubled frown.

"Yes, yes, the entire amount," he replied impatiently.

"Monsieur must be having a very bad run of luck," she commented sympathetically.

"Aren't you observant," Harvard said with an edge. He glanced at his watch. "Would you mind hurrying?"

He had gone back to the casino. At the entrance, he passed several police cars and saw a number of *gendarmes* and security personnel moving anxiously about. Ignoring them, he had returned to the gaming tables.

In a matter of less than two and a half hours, by the time the chimes sounded to close the casino at two A.M., Harvard had lost an additional one hundred eight thousand dollars. Returning the scant few chips he had left to the cashier's cage, he had received a credit for twelve thousand dollars, left the casino, and walked down the busy boulevard to the first bar he came to. There he had begun drinking. By three-thirty he was swacked. Staggering out of the bar, he managed to walk down to the waterfront where, after discussing his problem for a few minutes with a luminous full moon, he eventually lay down on the bench he was sitting on and passed out. Sometime around dawn, a police patrol found him, discovered a Hôtel de Paris key card in his pocket, and called the concierge there. Two bellmen were dispatched and Harvard was returned to his room, undressed, and put to bed in his underwear.

As he sat mulling over his incredible bad fortune, the buzzer at his door sounded briefly and seconds later the door opened and Georgette Manon came in, with a room service waiter who went about setting up a breakfast table.

"The maid came in and heard your shower," Georgette said. "I had notified her to advise me when you woke up. Are you all right, monsieur?"

"Yes, I'm just dandy," he replied in a raspy voice.

"I'm sorry," she said, crossing to open the door to his balcony.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That was a foolish question." Dismissing the room service waiter, she came over and took his arm. "Come, some coffee will help."

"Who put me to bed this morning?" he asked as she moved him to the breakfast table.

"I did." Georgette blushed slightly.

There was a folded newspaper on the breakfast table and Harvard saw at once a photograph of Adriana Marshall, under a headline that read: *AMERICAN HEIRESS KIDNAPPED.*

"My God—" he said, head beginning to clear more quickly as he read the French language story.

"Yes, it's dreadful," Georgette said. "She was taken from directly in front of the casino, in full view of a dozen people. The kidnappers telephoned the media to say that they were demanding five million dollars in ransom. No one knows whether they are terrorists or merely criminals."

From outside the balcony door suddenly came the sound of sirens. Georgette went over to look. A motorcade of automobiles with a police escort pulled up in front of the hotel.

"That must be the young woman's father," Georgette said. "He was on his way by private jet from the States to await further word from the kidnappers."

Harvard's now completely unfogged mind was racing. *Five million dollars.* And nobody knew yet who the kidnappers were.

"Georgette, I want you to do something for me," he said, taking his cup of coffee into the bathroom.

"Certainly, monsieur." She followed him, but stopped, mouth agape, when he discarded his robe and stood naked before her. Turning his back to her, he began lathering his face to shave.

"I want you to find out which suite the kidnap victim's father will be in. His name is Henry Marshall."

"All right, monsieur."

He turned to face her and she tried unsuccessfully to avoid looking at him.

"Also," he added, "I should have about twelve thousand dollars left in my concierge account. Exchange it, half for dollars, half for francs, and have the money ready for me when I come down."

"Yes, monsieur." She had never seen a naked American man before and wondered fleetingly if they were all so well built.

"Please hurry, Georgette," he urged.

"Uh—yes, certainly, monsieur."

Wrenching her eyes away, she hurried from the room, blushing deeply.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

Less than an hour later, dressed in a conservative business suit, with the currency he had picked up from Georgette in his pocket, Harvard crossed the boulevard and entered the casino. Habib was at the same *boule* wheel as the previous evening. There were no players at his table. Harvard sat down and placed a bet with a bank note. Habib spun the small wheel.

"How much was in the envelope you got last night for pointing out Adriana Marshall?" Harvard asked quietly.

"Pardon, monsieur?" the croupier said innocently.

"You were given an envelope by a man in a leather coat. He was paying you for showing him which woman in the casino was Adriana Marshall. A short while later, she was kidnapped. You are involved."

The *boule* ball dropped into the wheel's number-four slot. Harvard had bet eight.

"Monsieur is mistaken, I assure you," the croupier said.

"I saw the transaction," Harvard said firmly. He placed another bet.

"It did not occur, monsieur. You are mistaken." Habib spun the wheel.

"There are two other witnesses," Harvard lied. "We are prepared to go to the authorities."

The croupier fell silent, studying him. His dark Algerian eyes shifted back and forth to see if anyone was watching them. Finally he asked calmly, "What do you want?"

"The name of the man who paid you."

"I do not know. I know only that he is with an organization."

"What organization?"

"Some Irish group from Northern Ireland. Not the IRA. Something smaller, newer, less well known. I think he called it the 'INF.' I don't know what that stands for."

"Why did they kidnap her?"

Habib shrugged. "The money. To fund their activities."

The wheel stopped again and Harvard lost another bet.

"Where have they taken her?"

"I have no idea, monsieur, I swear. I only identified the woman for them."

"Do you have any way of contacting the man who paid you?"

"No."

"If you're lying to me, you will regret it."

"Allah be my judge," the croupier declared, "that is all I know."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

Returning to the hotel, Harvard paused at the concierge desk long enough for Georgette to whisper the number of Henry Marshall's suite. When he got to it, he was stopped by two private security guards.

"My name is James Harvard," he said. "Tell Mr. Marshall I'm the son of the late Harry Harvard, of Chicago. It is urgent that I see him."

Several minutes later, Harvard was shown into the living room of the suite, where Henry Marshall was in discussion with his executive assistant, a representative from the U. S. State Department, and two high-ranking French law enforcement officials. Marshall, a blunt, no-nonsense Midwestern businessman, rose when Harvard entered and said, "Young man, I was a great admirer of your father, but I must tell you that this is not the time for either a social call or a sympathy visit—"

"Sir, I believe I may be able to help you in this matter," Harvard said straightforwardly. "Just give me five minutes in private and you can decide."

Marshall studied him closely for a moment, then said, "All right, come with me."

Leaving the others, Marshall led Harvard into the large master bedroom of the suite. They sat at a small table overlooking the boulevard.

"If I can find out who has Adriana and where she is being held," Harvard said, "and if she can be rescued without you paying the five-million ransom, would you be willing to pay me a ten-percent fee? Half a million dollars?"

Henry Marshall frowned in puzzlement. "Did you say you were Harry Harvard's son?"

"Yes, but don't confuse me with my father. He was wealthy, I'm not."

"Didn't he leave you anything?"

"A great deal. But I've lost it all. I gamble."

Marshall shook his head in disgust. "You'd better leave. I don't want you meddling in this matter when my daughter's safety is at risk. I intend to pay the ransom. You'll have to find some other way to make half a million dollars."

"Look," Harvard reasoned, "it's going to take seventy-two hours for you to accumulate enough money to meet the ransom demand. Suppose I deliver Adriana back to you safe and unharmed within that time? Would you pay me the fee then?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No, I would not," Henry Marshall stated emphatically. "Understand, paying this ransom will be the most personally repugnant thing I've ever had to do. But I have no choice. I cannot risk my daughter's safety by allowing any rescue attempts or other activity that might agitate or perturb the people holding her. I cannot agree to let you intercede in this matter. That's my final decision."

Back in his own room, Harvard tried to rationalize Henry Marshall's position. He decided there was no other course Marshall could have taken. If he approved of Harvard's proposed involvement and something went wrong, resulting in harm to Adriana, her father would never forgive himself. But no one could fault him for following the kidnappers' instructions to the letter and paying the ransom. Even if something went badly wrong *then,* Henry Marshall could not be blamed; he was only doing the right thing.

But Harvard was convinced that Marshall *would* pay him the fee if he rescued Adriana. Everything Harvard had ever heard about Henry Marshall told him that Marshall was a fair man, an honest man, a man of ethics and morals and decency. A man much like Harvard's own late father.

So Harvard decided to take a chance. He did not have a hell of a lot to lose. Almost broke already, with no financial prospects for the future, maybe, just maybe, this was the break he needed, the opportunity to end his miserable run of bad luck and turn his fortunes around. A chance to hit for half a million dollars and start a new life. Go back to his brothers, buy back his stock, become a productive executive in the business their father and grandfather and great-grandfather had built.

There was just one covenant he had to make with himself. If at any time it appeared that what he was doing was in any way further endangering or threatening Adriana Marshall, he would back off at once. He did not particularly like Adriana, but if he could not help her, he certainly did not want to harm her.

That decided, he called Georgette at the concierge desk. "Georgette, I want you to get me a round-trip first-class ticket on the earliest flight to London, with the return open. I want to keep my room, so don't check me out. Charge the ticket to my room account. Call me as soon as the arrangements are made."

Hanging up, he could not help smiling briefly to himself. The way she had looked at him so frankly had not escaped his attention.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

With only a carry-on bag, Harvard flew to London on a British Air flight. At Heathrow, he paused long enough to telephone a former college roommate in Belfast to arrange a meeting, then paid cash for a seat on one of the hourly commuter hops across the Irish Sea to Northern Ireland. It was nine P.M. when he touched down at Aldergrove Airport and taxied into the city. Checking into the Midland Hotel, he quickly unpacked his extra clothes before hurrying out into the nippy Belfast night.

Mooney's Pub was only a block away, as his old roommate had said it would be, and that roommate was waiting for him with a wide, almost leering smile and a clamorous greeting. "Jimmy Harvard, you bloody Yankee! Did they finally run you out of *Shy*-cago?"

"Tyrone Buchanan, you Irish scoundrel!" Harvard greeted him back. The two men embraced and then Harvard stepped back and patted Tyrone's ample midsection. "Who's the father, Buck?"

"It's the bloody beer, Jimmy. Best in the world! My only remaining vice."

Harvard's eyebrows raised. "Oh? And what happened to all the others?"

"Gone," Tyrone said sadly. "Smothered by the bonds of holy matrimony and the awesome responsibilities of parenthood. Here, let me show you pictures of my family—"

They sat in a private booth with a stained-glass door, drinking dark ale, and for a few minutes talked of times past and things changed, before smiling a little sadly at each other about a good life once lived but now gone forever.

"Ah, Jimmy, we're a long ways from Notre Dame," Tyrone finally said with a sigh.

"Yes, we are," Harvard agreed.

Tyrone sat back and tilted his head a little. "So. You said your trip was important."

"Are you still in the civil service here, Ty?" Harvard asked.

"Yes, I am," his friend replied soberly. He lowered his voice, as if by habit. "It's difficult at times, me being a Catholic and the great majority of government offices being held by Protestants. But a few others and myself try to keep some sort of balance that will enable the peace discussions to continue. No matter what you hear from the press, Jimmy, we all, Protestants and Catholics alike, want the bloodshed to stop. It's the politicians, not the people, that can't seem to pull it together."

Harvard nodded solemnly. "I remembered all the talks we had about the troubles, as you called them, when we were back in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

school. I remembered the plans you had to go into government to see if you could make a difference. That's why I thought of you when I needed help in something." Harvard lowered his own voice. "What's the INF?"

Tyrone Buchanan's expression darkened. "The Irish National Front. A splinter group that broke off from the IRA when the peace talks began. Its leader is a man named Brian Kenna. He's very popular, very charismatic, and very much against any compromise with the British in Northern Ireland. What's your interest in him, Jimmy?"

"You know about the Marshall kidnapping, of course. Five million dollars in ransom is being demanded. I have very good information that the INF is behind it."

Tyrone sat back, pursing his lips for a moment. "That's a theory no one's come up with, but it certainly makes sense. The IRA has refused to fund any of Kenna's activities, and it's a known fact that he's desperately short of operating money. Five million would keep his group afloat for a long time." Tyrone's eyes fixed on Harvard. "How are you involved, Jimmy?"

"Our families are close," Harvard lied. "I'm trying to get her back before her father has to pay the ransom." He paused a beat, then asked, "Do you think this Kenna will kill her if things don't go his way?"

Tyrone shook his head emphatically. "Never. He's too smart for that. If he killed the girl, he'd be branded a murderer and a terrorist by most of the world. Brian Kenna wants to be a political force. He wants the people to love him, think he's a hero. He probably won't even publicly admit the kidnapping."

"You don't think any attempt by me to rescue her would result in her death?"

"No. *Your* death, perhaps. What's your plan, Jimmy?"

"I'm hoping you can help me locate an INF contact in Monaco. I don't care who or what the contact is: agent, informant, arms buyer, go-between, anything, as long as there's a connection."

"And if you locate such a person, what then?" Tyrone wanted to know.

Harvard shrugged. "I'm not sure. I'll have to improvise from there." Harvard leaned forward with an urgency that surprised his friend. "This is very important to me, Ty. Please help me if you can."

Tyrone stared at him long and steadily. "All right," he said at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

last, "I'll try. I have friends in the constabulary; perhaps they can help."

Harvard sat back, silently nodding his gratitude. And for the first time felt an inkling of fear at what he was doing.

At noon the next day, Tyrone picked Harvard up at the hotel and drove him outside the city to Ulster Prison.

"I've arranged this through a friend, who arranged it through a friend, who arranged it through another friend," the Irishman said. "There's no guarantee that it'll work."

At the old, fortress-like, stone-constructed prison, the two were met by Chief Warden Charnley, a robust man with a cherub face belied only by flat, hard eyes that had seen more misery in their time than they should have.

"We've a fellow in solitary that might be of some use to you, Mr. Harvard," he said. "His name's Denny Yougal. He's been in strict isolation for a couple of weeks now, so there's a good chance he won't be aware of the kidnapping."

"Will he cooperate, do you think?" Harvard asked.

"On something like this, possibly. I have a way I use now and then to get low-priority information. I think it's perfect for this situation."

Charnley pressed a button on his desk and Denny Yougal was brought in by a guard sergeant. He was a pudgy, kinky-haired young man with an attitude of innocence and false conviviality.

"Denny, my boy," said Charnley, "this gentleman here wants to locate an INF contact in Monaco. Any level will do, even a runner. Give us a name like a good lad, will you?"

Denny managed a puzzled expression. "I don't know no such people as that, Chief Warden," he said, as benignly as he could. "I couldn't even name an INF member here in Belfast. I'm completely nonpolitical, I am."

"All right, Denny," the chief warden said with a knowing chuckle. He nodded to the sergeant. "Take him down and have him released. Note in his record that he was cooperative with us."

"What's that, sir?" Denny asked, puzzled. "I wasn't cooperative."

"Of course, you were, Denny. You told us the truth, didn't you?"

"No, sir. I mean, yes, sir. I mean, you didn't believe me, did you?"

"What difference does it make?" the chief warden replied, all warmth vanishing from his voice now. "The office trusties will see the record and pass the word out next visiting day, but if you're

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

not INF, the ones who get that word will know you couldn't have told us anything."

"Then why do it, sir?" Denny all but implored.

"As a reason to release you, Denny. The prison's too crowded. Go along now."

The sergeant started to take him out, but Denny pulled back. "Wait a bloody while, will you?" He wet suddenly dry lips. "Supposin' I was to give you a name, what then?"

"Then I'd think you were lying and I'd have your file noted that you were most uncooperative and you'd be thrown back in isolation for another week or so, then released."

Agitated, Denny quickly thought it over. "All right," he said after a moment. "There's a man named Grimaud. He has an antique shop on the Rue de la Scala. He launders currency for the INF. That's all I know."

The chief warden and Tyrone Buchanan looked at Harvard, who nodded.

"That'll do," said Harvard.

Driving Harvard back to his hotel, Tyrone asked, "You can't stay for just a few hours? I'd really like you to meet my family—"

"Sorry, Ty. I'm on a tight schedule, remember? That ransom is now due to be paid in less than forty-eight hours."

"Of course. Stupid of me. Promise you'll come for a visit when this mess is over?"

"I'll look forward to it."

Tyrone dropped Harvard back at the Midland and the two former roommates said goodbye. In his room, Harvard called the Hôtel de Paris in Monaco and asked for Georgette at the concierge desk.

"This is James Harvard. I'd like you to do me another favor. Find out everything you can about a man named Grimaud who has an antique shop on Rue de la Scala."

Georgette agreed to help him further, but Harvard could detect a nervousness in her voice when she did. He had her transfer the call up to Henry Marshall's suite, where it was answered by an aide. "Tell Mr. Marshall that James Harvard called," he said. "Tell him I may soon have his daughter located. I'll call back when I have news."

Quickly then, he packed his carry-on and hurried down to the lobby to check out. Leaving the hotel, he settled into the back of the first taxi in the queue and said, "I need to get to the airport as quickly as possible."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I know a good, fast shortcut, sir," the driver replied.

The taxi swung into the flow of traffic. Behind it, a panel truck pulled out and followed.

The taxi driver avoided the busy express highway that led to Aldergrove in favor of a two-lane asphalt road that cut through a rural area and was virtually traffic-free. "This'll save us fifteen minutes, sir," the cabby assured him.

Resting his head back, Harvard tried to formulate in his mind some kind of approach to use on the antique dealer, Grimaud. Denny Yougal had said Grimaud was a money launderer; maybe offering him a cut of the fee from Henry Marshall was the way to begin. If that failed to tempt him, perhaps a threat of reporting him to French authorities would work. And if that failed—

Harvard's thoughts were interrupted by the sight of the panel truck speeding up alongside the taxi, and the muzzle of an automatic rifle suddenly appearing in the lowered passenger window.

"Driver, look out—!" Harvard yelled, throwing himself to the floorboard as a burst of gunfire strafed the backseat of the taxi.

In what seemed like only a split second, the taxi had left the pavement and slammed to a complete stop against the buttress of a culvert running alongside a wide field. Harvard's shoulder smashed into the car's right rear door and he was spilled half out of the vehicle when the door opened. From the ground he saw steam spewing from the taxi's cracked radiator. Scrambling to a crouch, he peered into the front seat and saw that the driver was bent over the steering wheel, groaning, with what looked to be a broken nose. Looking up over the edge of the road, he saw that the panel truck had come to a stop and two men were hurrying back to the crash site. There were no other vehicles in either direction.

"Stay put," he said to the driver. "They're not after you."

Scrambling down the grade, Harvard began running in a low, painful crouch along the bottom of the culvert. Sweat streamed into his eyes, burning them, and something thicker than sweat ran over his top lip. Reaching up, he found that he too had a nosebleed. Pausing for a second, he looked back and saw that the two men, guns visible in their hands, had now reached the taxi and were scrambling down to it. At the same time, across the culvert, he saw a storm drain that ran under the road.

Sucking in a deep breath, Harvard got inside the drain and began duck-walking toward the circle of light at the other end, balancing himself with both hands on the curved inside walls of the drain. In less than a minute, he emerged on the opposite side

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the road. He was just in time to hear one of the men yell, "The bloody bastard ain't here!"

"He's got to be out in the field somewhere," shouted the other. "Come on!"

As the two men, squinting against the sun, moved tentatively into the field, Harvard doubled back in the culvert across the road and hurried toward the point where their panel truck was pulled over. If he could just get far enough away from them in the opposite direction from where they were looking, he might have a chance—

Abruptly, he stopped. As he was about to rush past the panel truck, he suddenly became aware that the vehicle's engine was idling. The fact struck him like a fist. *They didn't turn the ignition off!*

Harvard peered down the road. The two men were at least fifty yards away. Taking another deep breath, he scurried out of the culvert and raced to the truck. Leaping inside, he was momentarily surprised to find the steering wheel missing. But it was merely on the other side, and his harried mind snapped back to the fact that he was in Ireland and vehicles had right-hand drives, not left. Sliding over, he shifted gears, eased onto the road, and drove off.

Behind him, in the rearview mirror, he saw the two men scramble back up to the road and stand there helplessly as the truck moved farther out of their range of fire.

Within an hour, Harvard was on a commuter flight back to London. He had lost his carry-on bag in the wreck, but his plane ticket had been in his inside coat pocket, along with his passport and wallet. After abandoning the panel truck on the airport parking lot, he had brushed himself off good, then gone to a men's room and cleaned up even more. A cold, wet paper towel had taken care of his bloody nose and made him presentable enough to board the plane. After a ninety-minute layover at Heathrow, he was on a flight back to Nice. It was just dusk when he got into his rented convertible for the drive from the Nice airport to the Hôtel de Paris, but he felt as if he had traveled ten thousand miles and not slept in days.

Georgette saw him the moment he entered the lobby and hurried over to him. "Are you all right?" she asked with genuine concern.

"I think so. Did you get any information on Grimaud?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. He is a fairly well-known antiques dealer, has a good reputation, in business for about ten years,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

apparently is very prosperous. Incidentally, your friend has been here twice this afternoon looking for you—"

Harvard froze and his eyes swept the lobby. "What friend?"

"He did not give me his name. A nice-looking man with an Irish accent. He was most anxious to know when you would return."

Harvard put his hand on Georgette's arm and casually, unobtrusively guided her to a corner of the big lobby where he could see everyone who was moving about.

"Georgette, listen carefully to me," he said, keeping his voice as calm as possible. "My life is in danger. I am trying to help find the American girl who was kidnapped night before last. The man who was here looking for me may be a member of a terrorist group that has her. I'm telling you this because I don't dare stay here at the hotel tonight. I need someplace to hide. Is there any way you can help me?"

"I—I don't know, monsieur," she replied nervously. "It all sounds—so very frightening—"

"Do you live alone, Georgette?" he asked straightforwardly.

"Well, I—sometimes. That is, I have a boyfriend who is a seaman. He stays with me when he is in port. But he is at sea right now, due back in two days."

"Will you let me stay with you tonight?"

Georgette looked down at the carpet, as if embarrassed.

"Please, Georgette. I have nowhere else to turn."

She nodded. "Yes, all right."

"I'm very grateful," he said, squeezing her hand. "Where do you live?"

"Forty-four la Belle Aurore. In the La Condamine district."

"Call your landlady. Tell her I'm your cousin from the U. S. and to let me in." He glanced around. "Now, walk away from me and return to your desk. If anyone asks, say that you were giving me some messages and that I was going up to my room."

Georgette walked away and Harvard strode toward the nearest elevator bank. A burly man in sports clothes rose from a chair across the lobby and walked the same way. Noticing him, Harvard walked faster and managed to get on an elevator and close the door just before the man got there.

On three, Harvard exited the elevator, walked to the end of the hall to a stairwell, and hurried down to a side exit of the hotel.

In a small department store in the La Condamine district, Harvard purchased a pair of jeans, a turtleneck pullover, deck shoes,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and a windbreaker. He also took time to shop for wine, cheese, sausage, peppers, and bread for his and Georgette's dinner. At the address she gave him, he found a neat six-flat building. Georgette's flat was on the third floor in the rear, and the landlady not only let him in without a problem but flirted openly with him as well.

Georgette's flat, Harvard found, was clean but outrageously untidy. There was lacy underwear in the kitchen, uneaten food in the sitting room, the bed was unmade, drawers left open, magazines, shoes, soft-drink bottles strewn about. Harvard, fastidiously neat himself, spent an hour straightening up the place, even folding Georgette's panties and putting them away. Then he showered and changed into the new clothes he had bought, after which he cooked up the sausages and peppers, sliced the cheese and bread, and opened the wine to let it breathe before pouring. When Georgette arrived home, she found her apartment tidier than it had ever been, and her dinner ready.

"My, aren't you the little homemaker," she said. "Perhaps I should forget Marcel and just keep you."

"Marcel?"

"My boyfriend who is at sea."

"I think," Harvard told her wryly, "you are better off with Marcel."

Georgette showered and donned slacks and a blouse for the evening, and they dined at a little table next to high, open windows that overlooked a smaller building across the alley, on the lighted rooftop of which a young boy and girl alternated between feeding pigeons and kissing passionately. Harvard tried to make conversation around an awkwardness that seemed to hang between them. He told her a bit about himself, while inquiring of her own life and past. Her background was ordinary: She was one of six children of a farming family in LaMotte in Provence. Three sons had remained to become farmers, while three sisters left to find lives elsewhere. One of her sisters was a maritime expediter in Marseilles, the other a banking clerk in Toulon. Georgette herself had begun as a hotel maid and moved through the ranks as a café waitress, café cashier, hotel reservations clerk, desk clerk, and finally apprentice concierge. She had met her boyfriend Marcel at a dance across the Italian border in San Remo, where his Mediterranean cargo ship was docked. Their affair had been ongoing for three years. Both wanted to get married—but they never wanted it at the same time.

Even though Georgette answered his questions about her family

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and her life, Harvard sensed that as the meal progressed she seemed to grow somewhat cool and distant. He thought perhaps it was because she was developing concerns about him being there.

"Georgette," he said, "if this arrangement has become uncomfortable for you, I can try to find someplace else to stay—"

"Certainly not," she said emphatically. "I agreed to let you stay, and stay you will." She looked out the window. "I suppose I feel a little ill at ease because there is such a great difference between us. You come from wealth, prosperity, a life of advantages. Next to that, I am so very common and uncultured, not refined or—"

"Georgette," he interrupted, taking her hand across the table, "let's remember who is helping whom in this situation. You are those things only in your mind. To me, you are a flawless person that I have been very fortunate to meet."

"You are just being kind," she said. "Were it not for the fact that you are in trouble, I would not get a second glance from you. We both know that." She stood up abruptly. "Excuse me, please. I have an errand to run."

Almost before Harvard knew it, she had got her purse and a beret, and was out the door.

Depressed, Harvard finished eating alone, then cleaned up after the meal, and finally sat next to the window looking up at the stars as he drank the last of the wine.

Georgette came back two hours later, obviously having had more to drink after leaving. Although slightly tipsy, she was nevertheless politely reserved.

"Please forgive my earlier behavior," she said rather formally, bringing him a quilt and pillow to sleep on the couch. She retired to her bedroom and Harvard heard a loud metallic click as she locked the door.

Feeling guilty about involving her, he undressed down to his underwear and stretched out on the couch. He had a bad tension headache, and a shoulder ache from the jarring crash of the taxi, which seemed like so long ago but was actually less than twelve hours earlier. Wishing he had asked Georgette for some aspirin, but not wanting to disturb her now, he settled down with his eyes closed and tried to go to sleep. But each time he began to drift off, he heard a loud crash in his mind and remembered again the impact of the taxi smashing into the culvert.

Finally, well after midnight, when Harvard at last was slipping into a restful sleep, he heard another sharp metallic click like the one that had sounded when Georgette locked her bedroom door.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He lay very still in the dark, drawing bare, soundless breath, wondering if someone was trying to get into the apartment. Then he felt Georgette's smooth, warm arms slide down his torso as she bent over him from the end of the couch where his head lay. She spoke in a whisper, her face mere inches above his in the blackness.

"I am sorry for the way I acted tonight," she said. "I was not angry with you, but with myself because I am so attracted to you. I have been trying to resist the temptation I feel so strongly to make love with you. I wanted to be faithful to my boyfriend, who is the only man I have ever made love with. I wanted to be able to say that in all my life, only one man had me. Now you have ruined all that—"

He felt the quilt being dragged off him, felt her fingers searching. "Georgette, I don't want to be the reason for you being angry with yourself," he said. He took hold of her hands and stopped their movement. "Let me find someplace else to stay—"

"No!" she snapped, jerking her hands from his. He tried to push himself up as he heard a drawer being opened in a table against the back of the couch. That was followed by the unmistakable sound of a switchblade stiletto being opened, and Harvard immediately felt the point of a blade touch his throat. "If you try to leave, I will cut you," Georgette threatened. "You're going to do everything I tell you to."

Harvard lay back and remained very still as her free hand began a tantalizing finger dance on his flesh. Her breasts covered his face as she leaned farther over him. After several moments, he reached up and took the knife from her hand.

"You won't need that," he said as he pulled her down on top of him. He closed his eyes again, but not to sleep this time.

The next morning, a lazily satiated Georgette looked up from the bed as Harvard dressed. After expelling a deep, pleasure-saturated sigh, she suddenly became serious and asked, "What will happen today?"

Harvard grunted softly. "I couldn't even guess." He bobbed his chin toward the other room. "There's coffee on; shall I bring you a cup?"

"No, I'll come out." She got up, wrapping a sheet around her supple young body like a great cape, and following him out of the room. He poured the coffee and they sat together on the couch where their marathon lovemaking had begun. Harvard picked up the stiletto where it lay on the floor and closed its spring blade.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Do you use this often to have your way with men?" he asked.

Georgette blushed slightly. "Of course not, you idiot. I was only being dramatic. It's not even mine, not really. I found it on the street; someone must have dropped it. I was going to give it to Marcel, but I forgot I had it. Until last night, that is." Georgette squeezed his thigh. "I'm so glad you didn't make me use it."

"So am I," Harvard said, laughing. He hefted the weapon thoughtfully in his hand. "May I borrow it for today? Just in case?"

"Of course," she said, her expression turning to worry.

They finished their coffee in a quieter mood, with Harvard assuring Georgette that he would be very, very careful in what he was about to undertake, and would let her know at once when he was safe. At the door, as they kissed goodbye, Harvard asked, "Are you sorry about last night?"

"No, I am glad. You were—well, very different from Marcel."

"Different how?"

"More—proficient, I would say. More gifted."

"Perhaps we can do it again sometime," he suggested, her words stirring him.

"I don't think so. Last night was incredible, but it wasn't love. Marcel is love."

She pushed him gently out the door and closed it.

The antique shop of André Grimaud was small, tidy, and had an understated elegance. Grimaud himself was a tall, gray-haired man with a matching goatee and slightly stooped shoulders.

"*Bonjour,* monsieur," he greeted Harvard. "How may I help you?"

"This settee," Harvard said, going over to a period piece done in richly woven gold brocade, "what is its price?"

"That is from the estate of Prince Dupré," said Grimaud. "A very fine piece. It is seventy-five thousand francs."

"And this canvas?" Harvard asked, indicating an ornately framed oil painting hanging above the settee.

"That, monsieur, is an original Commard, done in 1851. Forty thousand francs."

"They are both exquisite," Harvard said with a smile. "What I really want, however, is the name of your principal INF contact in Monaco."

Grimaud frowned. "I do not understand, monsieur."

"INF," Harvard repeated. "Irish National Front. You launder currency for them, I believe."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Grimaud placed one hand on a telephone on his desk. "The *gendarmes* can be here in five minutes," he said threateningly.

"Five minutes," Harvard told him evenly, smile fading, "can be a long time." From the pocket of his windbreaker he took the stiletto, released its blade, and sliced a six-inch cut in the Prince Dupré settee.

"Oh my God—" Grimaud said, the blood draining from his face.

"Who's your contact?" Harvard asked again, raising the blade to within an inch of the Commard oil.

At that moment, a man stepped from behind a curtained room next to Harvard and punched a gun barrel roughly in the small of his back. "Stand still, Yank," he said in a quiet Irish brogue, "or I'll open you up like you did that bench."

Harvard froze. Grimaud turned whiter.

"Bench?" the antiques dealer said, as if he were going to be ill. "A Prince Dupré settee a *bench?*"

"Shut up, André," said the gunman. "Hand the sticker back, mate," he told Harvard. "Easy does it."

Harvard surrendered the stiletto. Taking him by the collar, the gunman eased him into the curtained room, where another man stepped forward and handcuffed his wrists behind him. While that was being done, the first man put away his gun and from a pint bottle poured liquid ether onto a folded cloth. While one man held him as still as possible, the other clamped the cloth over Harvard's nose and mouth. Harvard struggled to break free, but in seconds his mind began to fog and he felt his muscles responding laxly. Presently he realized that he was being lowered to the floor. Consciousness faded, then returned as his system fought it, then faded again. His awareness and understanding were filtered, reduced to fuzzy images and deep, hollow voices.

"—the value of that settee!" one voice said angrily.

"—adequately reimbursed just as soon as we collect for the girl," another placated.

"—suppose you don't collect? Suppose the police find her first?"

"—safe and well hidden. The ballet theater has been closed since February. No one would even think to look there. Now relax, mate—"

That was the last thing Harvard heard before he went under completely.

Slowly he became aware of a gentle, swaying motion, as if he were swinging lightly in a hammock. Both arms were numb and he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could feel that his wrists were still handcuffed behind him. Opening his eyes, he found that he was lying on the deck of a boat of some kind. An anchored boat. With the waves lapping against its sides, rocking it buoyantly.

Slowly, with great effort, Harvard managed to sit up. He saw that the boat was a cabin cruiser. Beyond its port rail, he could see the pastel hillside homes of Monaco rising toward a cloudless sky. On the stern, the two men who had captured him at Grimaud's were playing cards on a wooden water cask.

"Looks like Secret Agent Double-O Zero is waking up, Tim," said one of them.

"He ain't no secret agent," replied Tim. "He's Jack the bloody Ripper. The *furniture* ripper!"

They laughed in unison and Tim fished a cigarette from his shirt pocket. "Give us a light, Beamon."

Beamon flicked a lighter to Tim's cigarette and they continued their game, ignoring Harvard. Even when Harvard managed to struggle to his feet, balancing himself on the outside cabin wall, they did not seem particularly concerned.

"If you're a mind to jump overboard, go right ahead," Tim told him casually. "Neither Beamon or me'll stop you. But you probably won't get very far with your hands cuffed like that."

Harvard looked around. The cruiser was anchored about three hundred yards offshore in Monaco Harbor. There were other craft on the water, but none near enough for him to count on their help if he jumped. With a quiet sigh, wiggling his fingers to get the blood circulating faster in his tingling arms, he made his way sluggishly over to where the men were playing and slumped down on a bulkhead locker.

"What's the game?" he asked.

"You wouldn't know it if we was to tell you," Tim replied sarcastically.

Harvard watched the next hand closely. Five cards were dealt and the men placed bets in French francs. Each player then threw in certain of his cards and was dealt replacements. Each then bet again, laid down his cards, and called out the value of his hand.

"Minus two," said Tim. He had the ten of diamonds, queen of spades, seven of hearts, three of clubs, and six of spades.

"Plus four," said Beamon. He laid down the king of hearts, six of clubs, nine of hearts, four of clubs, and five of spades.

"You're playing Red-and-Black," Harvard said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The two Irishmen looked at him incredulously. "You *know* the game?" Beamon asked.

"Yes. Are you playing it high or low?"

"Low," Tim said.

"I'd like to take a hand," Harvard told them, "but I assume you've stolen my money."

Tim glared at him. "Well, you *assume* wrong, Yank," he said coldly. "We're not common thieves. We happen to be members of the Irish National Front; in other words, we're revolutionaries. Your bloody money is still in your pocket."

"Get it out for me, will you?" Harvard asked, standing and stepping over to Beamon. The Irishman dug out Harvard's wallet, removed the currency, and replaced the wallet. "Well-heeled, aren't you?" he commented, examining Harvard's last few thousand dollars.

"Cuff my hands in front of me so that I can play, and I'll give you a chance to win some of it," Harvard offered.

Tim and Beamon exchanged cautious but clearly interested glances. After a moment, Beamon asked with a shrug, "What's the harm?"

"All right, cover him," Tim said.

With Beamon holding a gun to Harvard's head, Tim uncuffed the prisoner's wrists from behind and recuffed them in front of him. Harvard immediately took his money and drew up a keg to sit down. "Whose deal is it?" he asked.

"Mine," Tim said churlishly. He snatched up the cards, muttering, "He *assumes* we've stolen his money. The bloody nerve." Shuffling the cards, he began to deal, but Harvard stopped him.

"Excuse me, but I believe I'm entitled to cut the cards before you deal."

"Are you saying we're cheats, as well?" Tim asked irritably. But he gathered the cards back into a deck, shuffled again, and slammed the deck down on the barrel.

"Thank you," Harvard said, cutting.

They played for nearly an hour, each of them winning a little and gradually losing it back, all three staying about even. As they played, Harvard unobtrusively got his bearings on the boat. From where he sat, he could see into the cabin, see that the key was in the ignition switch. The cabin hatch opened in, and was held that way by a shim. The boat was turned outbound, barely bobbing in a tide of no more than six inches, which meant that the anchor

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was probably at half-depth or less. The cabin hatch, Harvard judged, was about fifteen feet away.

He waited until a particularly competitive hand was being played, with all three of them betting more heavily than usual. Then, as Tim and Beamon concentrated on their replacement cards, Harvard suddenly brought up both feet and kicked out from under them the kegs on which they were sitting, sending them sprawling back onto the deck. Leaping up, he sprang past them and dove through the open hatch into the cabin. Kicking away the shim, he slammed the hatch and bolted it from the inside. Behind him, Beamon got to his knees and drew his gun, but Tim quickly seized Beamon's arm.

"No gun play—harbor police—"

Together they charged the hatch, putting their shoulders against it, but it held firm. Inside, Harvard started the inboard engine and jerked back on the throttle, not hard enough to stall, but with enough force to send the boat into a tight circle as he raised its anchor. The two Irishmen were tossed back to the deck in the maneuver, groped to regain their balance, then were slammed back again as the anchor broke the surface and the craft accelerated to high speed on a straight course.

As soon as he had the boat under control, Harvard began veering all over the outer harbor, making sharp turns that doused his captors with heavy spray and several times almost careened one or the other of them overboard. Still, the two men doggedly resumed trying to break through the cabin hatch. After several minutes of wild maneuvering, Harvard saw the blue flashing lights of a harbor patrol boat leaving the shore in his direction. At the same time, he heard the sound of wood splintering as the cabin hatch began to give way to the solid shoulders of the two Irishmen.

Looking desperately around the harbor, Harvard saw an empty inbound garbage scow creeping slowly toward shore. A reckless idea quickly forming in his mind, he made a wide circle around the scow and reduced speed as he came alongside it, heading in the opposite direction, on the side away from the approaching patrol boat. Shifting to neutral, he let the engine idle as he clumsily used his cuffed hands to slide open a cabin window and squeeze through it onto the forward deck. Balancing himself precariously on the bow, he stuck one foot back through the window and kicked the throttle to full speed again. Tim and Beamon were rushing around the starboard side to get to him, and the cruiser was churning up forward motion, when Harvard made a short,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

running jump and leaped onto the slow-moving scow. He managed to land without falling and at once grabbed onto a pipe railing to balance himself. Tim and Beamon looked back at him in flabbergasted surprise, and Harvard smiled and gave them the finger as the cruiser sped off toward the open sea with the harbor patrol boat in hot pursuit.

On the scow, the French garbage workers, who had been on the bridge lying in the sun as they cruised back to port, sat up and looked curiously at Harvard. Noting his handcuffed wrists, they spoke a few quiet words among themselves, shrugged, and resumed lying in the sun.

Harvard peacefully rode the scow back to the industrial dock and went ashore without incident.

Carrying an empty jute sack from the scow to conceal his cuffed hands, Harvard made his way to the nearest marketplace and found a locksmith.

"I have a problem," he told the man in French, and exposed his hands. "I am not a fugitive; it is a personal matter. No police are after me. Can you help me?"

The locksmith examined the cuffs. "Perhaps," he said, with typical French reserve and indifference.

"I also have another problem. No money. But I have a very expensive Movado watch," he said, turning his left wrist to show the watch. "I will trade the watch for release from these cuffs and two hundred francs."

The locksmith took the watch several doors away to a jeweler friend for appraisal, and when he returned accepted the offer. He only had to make three attempts from a ring of keys before unlocking the cuffs. Minutes later, Harvard was crossing the marketplace, free of the handcuffs and with two hundred francs in his pocket.

At a small café, he ravenously ate two plates of fried fish and half a loaf of bread and mustard. As he ate, the snatches of conversation that he had heard just before he passed out from the ether came back to him. Particularly conspicuous in the recollection was the mention of a ballet theater.

"Excuse me," he said to the proprietor, "where is the ballet theater?"

"The *Salle Garnier,* monsieur? It is directly behind the casino building, across from the train station. But it is closed until the fall season."

"Merci," said Harvard. Bad luck, he thought, He did not relish

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the idea of moving about that close to the hotel; any other INF members in the area would likely be on the lookout for him as soon as his escape became known. But, he decided, he had no choice. It was already late afternoon of the third day since the kidnapping. If he waited any longer, he ran the risk of the ransom being paid and losing his chance for a fee.

Leaving the café, Harvard hailed a taxi and asked to be taken to the railroad station. It was only a short drive away, across the Rue de Portier behind the huge casino building. Emerging from the taxi, he walked briskly into the station and from inside one of its doors studied the building which housed the ballet theater. It was set on magnificent grounds, which at the moment were being tended by a cadre of municipal gardeners wearing dark green coveralls with a Monaco state patch on their left shoulder. Most of the men seemed to be working independently, some on the lawn, some on flower beds, shrubbery, trees.

Leaving the train station, Harvard crossed the street and began strolling the grounds, pausing here and there, pretending to study the building's architecture and landscaping. Near the rear on one side of the building, he came upon the tool and supply shed used by the gardeners. Just inside the door was a bin containing clean, folded sets of the green coveralls. An attendant was farther inside, with a clipboard, appearing to inventory bags of fertilizer.

"Monsieur," Harvard said in French, "pardon, but could you tell me the time?"

With only a cursory glance, the attendant told him the time. Harvard thanked him, shoved a set of coveralls under his windbreaker, and walked away.

In some bushes, Harvard hid the windbreaker and donned the coveralls. Then he began exploring the theater building much closer up, being careful to avoid contact with other men in green coveralls as he did. Everything was locked up tightly, not a door or window offering access. But near the rear on the opposite side, he discovered a low basement window concealed by shrubbery. Finding a small rock, he wrapped his handkerchief around it and with one sharp tap broke a single pane enough to remove a piece of it large enough to reach inside to the lock. Within a minute, he had slipped inside.

The basement of the theater was dark and silent, and Harvard felt himself begin to perspire. In the light filtering from outside, he located a stairway and climbed slowly to the main level. Passing through a door at the top, he found himself in the backstage

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

area of the performance arena. Quietly, moving one slow step at a time, he made his way from one shadowy part of the floor to another, pausing to listen intently for any sound. The silence was eerie, and the darkness, even after his eyes had adjusted to it, seemed menacing.

Harvard moved farther into the deepness of the place, feeling around ropes and props and weights and all manner of other stage apparatus. His eyes shifted constantly, trying to penetrate the void around him, his head turning in all directions as his ears searched for sound; his neck and torso now slick with sweat, but his mouth bone-dry, throat constricting, stomach becoming acidy, hands beginning to tremble—

Then he stopped, stood as if welded motionless, and stared at a thin line of light coming from a door that was cracked open an inch.

Slowly, inches at a time, he moved over to the door. From inside, he heard a faint rustle of paper, nothing more. Leaning closer, he peered through the crack. Inside the room he could see the end of a cot, and on it part of a woman's bare feet and calves.

Bracing himself for any consequence, Harvard used one finger to push the door open an inch farther. More of the woman's bare legs came into view, up to mid-thigh. He also now saw, between the door and the cot, the back of a straight chair with a shoulder holster and automatic pistol hanging from it.

Another inch. The woman was wearing ice-blue satin bikini panties. A man was sitting on the straight chair in his undershirt, his back to the door, reading a newspaper. Harvard judged himself to be about eight feet from the shoulder holster. Trying to wet his dry lips, trying to keep his hands steady, he began to slowly push the door far enough open for him to step inside.

The woman on the cot, he saw as more of the room came into view, was Adriana Marshall. She was wearing a sheer halter bra on top, raised up on one elbow, idly thumbing through a magazine. Harvard got the door open wide enough and stepped toward the gun. Adriana looked up; her eyes widened and she drew in her breath audibly. The slight noise caused the man on the chair to look over. Seeing Adriana's eyes focused on something behind him, he leapt to his feet, whirling around, but he was not quick enough. Harvard beat him to the gun by a microsecond and leveled it at him. The man froze, hands raised outward.

"Keep very still," Harvard ordered. He flicked his glance to Adriana. "You all right?"

"I—yes—what—what are you doing here?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Working for your father. Where are your clothes?"

"Over there," she pointed to a closet.

"Get dressed. Quickly." As Adriana moved nervously to the closet, Harvard studied the man he held at gunpoint. He was rough-cut handsome, with chiseled features under a pasture of thick black hair. There was a hint of a smile on his lips and no fear to be found in the level gaze of his flat blue eyes. "Are you Kenna?" Harvard asked.

"That's right, mate. Brian Kenna. Since you know my name, you must also know that I'm commander-in-chief of the Irish National Front, which means I'm in a position to negotiate with you."

"Save it," Harvard told him. He glanced over at the closet, where Adriana was removing clothes from a hanger.

"Whatever her old man's paying," Kenna said, "I can do better for you out of the ransom. It's five million, y'know."

Harvard shook his head. "Taking money from you would be the same as joining your organization. That doesn't appeal to me. People are working very hard to make a peace in Northern Ireland, and all you're doing is trying to sabotage it. You want to keep the war going because you think it makes you a big man. Commander-in-chief. Of what? Bombing pubs? Ambushing soldiers and policemen? Seeing little kids get shot down in the street? No, Kenna, I wouldn't be good at any of that—"

His words were interrupted by the unmistakable feel of a pistol barrel against the back of his head.

"Lower that gun," Adriana Marshall said evenly. "Do it now or I'll kill you."

Son of a bitch, Harvard thought. I don't believe this.

When Harvard lowered the gun he held, Brian Kenna stepped forward and relieved him of it. Adriana, still in bra and panties, stepped around Harvard and stood next to Kenna. Smiling, he kissed her on the cheek. "Don't know what I'd do without you, darlin'," he said. "I knew I got you your own gun for a reason."

With one finger, Adriana touched a religious medal hanging around Kenna's neck. "I think this St. Christopher medal I gave you brought us luck."

"Could be, darlin'. Put on a robe now; I don't want this Yank getting his eyes full of my woman."

"So the whole kidnapping was arranged," Harvard said.

"Every step of the way," Kenna confirmed. "Y'see, Adriana inherits five million dollars from her late grandmother's estate

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when she reaches age thirty. This was just a way for her to get it three years early."

"You mean for *you* to get it."

"Her, me, what's the difference? It's all for the organization. She believes in the cause same as me. Now then, where's Tim and Beamon?"

"Probably in jail. Last time I saw them, the harbor police were running them down."

"I see. And you got away—again. You're a slippery one, Yank. I don't mind telling you, you've had us jumping these past two days. But now we're almost down to the wire on that ransom, so it's time to stop playing games. I'm going to have to settle you down somewheres myself." To Adriana, he said, "Get my shirt and coat for me, luv."

With the gun in his coat pocket, and the pocket pressed into Harvard's side, Kenna escorted him to the rear stage door, Adriana going ahead of them to turn on enough light for them to see. "We're going for a little drive, mate," Kenna said at the door. "Out in the country, where I can handcuff you to a tree this time. But if you get funny and try anything slippery, I'll pack you in right on the street and take my chances getting away. I don't want to kill you, Yank, but if I have to, I will. That's a promise." He kissed Adriana on the cheek again. "Get your clothes on and pack up. Soon's I get back, we'll move to another location."

Nudging Harvard with the gun, he said, "Okay, move out."

Exiting the building by the stage door, Kenna prodded Harvard toward a Volvo parked on an adjoining lot. As they proceeded along, several theater workmen stared curiously at the pair, Kenna glancing around edgily, Harvard still wearing the stolen green coveralls. Soon several of the workmen were in a group, talking and gesturing toward the pair. Kenna, noticing the attention, coaxed Harvard to walk faster. But before they could get to the car, one of the workmen shouted to a pair of municipal policemen patrolling the grounds.

"Hey, *gendarme,* there is something funny there!" he yelled, pointing. "That man in green is not one of us! He has stolen those coveralls!"

Frowning, the policemen altered their path and intercepted Kenna and Harvard at the edge of the lot.

Paying only cursory attention to Kenna, the officers began to question Harvard about the green coveralls. Harvard shrugged and pretended he could not understand them.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What the bloody hell are they saying?" Kenna asked crossly.

"I don't know," Harvard lied blandly. "Perhaps if we were to show them our passports—"

"We'll show them nothing," Kenna said tightly. "Get in the car or I'll blast you and them—"

Several of the workmen then straggled over, talking among themselves, and out on the street a police car patrol noticed the gathering and pulled over, its two occupants hurrying to join their fellow officers.

"You going to shoot *everybody,* Kenna?" Harvard asked.

Kenna glanced around helplessly, then took his gun hand out of his pocket.

Turning to the policemen, Harvard said, in perfect French, "Officers, I am an American tourist. I stole these coveralls as a joke. But this man here," he indicated Kenna, "is an Irish terrorist, and he has a handgun in his coat pocket."

Two officers quickly seized Kenna and wrested the automatic from his pocket. A police van was summoned, and moments later both Harvard and Kenna were hustled off to jail.

Two hours later, Brian Kenna was pacing nervously up and down in a cell when the jail corridor door opened and a turnkey let Harvard enter. He walked up to Kenna's cell.

"I'm leaving now, Kenna. Just wanted to say goodbye."

"How the hell did you get out?" Kenna demanded.

"By admitting the error of my ways, of course. I went before the police magistrate and pled guilty to minor mischief in the theft of the coveralls. My fine was one hundred fifty francs, which I barely had enough money to pay. I am now a free man." He forced himself to look solemn. "You, on the other hand, are charged with possession of an illegal concealed firearm, a much more serious matter. If I were you, I'd learn to speak French; you're going to be in here for quite a while." Glancing at the turnkey, Harvard lowered his voice. "However, I might be able to help you—" He gestured for Kenna to come closer to the cell door, and he himself also stepped closer, as if to speak confidentially. Instead, when Kenna was close enough, Harvard reached in and snatched the St. Christopher medal from his neck, breaking the chain that held it. Kenna grabbed for him through the bars, but Harvard moved quickly away.

"Give that back!" Kenna snarled.

"So long, Commander-in-Chief," Harvard said, walking away.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

Back at the ballet theater, Harvard entered this time through the unlocked stage door. He found Adriana in the same room, dressed in slacks and a jacket now, sitting on the cot, a small bag at her feet. When Harvard entered, she snatched up the gun Kenna had given her and leveled it at him. He merely shook his head calmly.

"It's over, Adriana," he said quietly. "Kenna's in jail."

"You're lying—"

"No, I'm not. Here—" He tossed the St. Christopher medal onto the cot. "It's over."

Staring at the medal, the young woman's shoulders slumped. She lowered the gun and Harvard came over and gently took it from her hand.

"Come on. I'll take you to your father."

Head bowed, she began to cry softly. With one finger under her chin, he raised her face and brushed away her tears.

"Look, I won't tell your father the kidnapping was faked," Harvard said. "Kenna can't admit it, so no one will ever know. In three years, you'll get your inheritance legitimately. Maybe by that time, you won't want to give it away. And maybe by that time, there'll be peace in Northern Ireland." Picking up her bag, he put an arm around her shoulder. "Come on, now."

Together, they left the theater.

Harvard managed to slip Adriana into the Hôtel de Paris by a rear door. There was an emotional reunion with her distraught father in his suite. Afterward, Henry Marshall's aides accompanied Adriana to her own suite to be examined by an American Embassy physician, and put in the care of a private nurse for the rest of the night.

After his daughter left, Marshall turned to Harvard. "You have my gratitude, Mr. Harvard."

Harvard smiled slightly. "I value that, sir. But we also discussed a fee—"

"No, *you* discussed a fee. I rejected it, remember? In fact, if you will recall, I specifically *declined* to enter into any arrangement with you on the ground that it might further endanger my daughter's life."

"But I got her back," Harvard appealed, beginning to feel ill. "I got her back safely and unharmed—"

"That's not the point," Marshall argued. "The fact of the matter

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is, we had no agreement, young man. But, as I said, I *am* grateful. Come see me back in Chicago and I'll find a job for you in my firm."

"A *job?*"

"Yes, a job. Work. Lots of people do it."

"But, sir—"

"That's my final word on it," Henry Marshall said emphatically. "If you'll excuse me now—" Marshall opened the door of the suite and gestured to his private security guards. "Escort this gentleman to the elevator."

Harvard stared incredulously at the millionaire manufacturer for a moment, then looked at the grimly determined expressions of the security guards, and shook his head wryly at the futility of further argument. Feeling like a fool, he let the security guards walk him through the hall and put him on the elevator.

On the way down in the elevator, Harvard wondered briefly if Henry Marshall would have paid him had Harvard revealed that the kidnapping had been contrived instead of real. Not that it mattered; Harvard had made a vow with himself not to do anything that would hurt Adriana, and he intended to live up to that vow. She would have enough problems getting over this affair without him adding to them.

Walking glumly to his room, Harvard felt a malaise settle over him as he realized how completely broke he was. He knew he could live well for a couple of months on his credit cards, until they continued to remain unpaid, and then he would be bankrupt. His future, which somehow had always seemed to have a buffer, a cushion against absolute failure, was at the moment more bleak and dismal than ever before in his life.

So this is what it feels like, he thought. He had always heard about it, but never personally experienced it before.

But now he knew.

Now he was there.

Rock bottom.

The next morning, Harvard was having breakfast on the outside terrace when he saw Henry Marshall and his entourage, with Adriana in the middle of it all, emerge from the hotel to waiting limousines. Adriana did not see him, but her father did. Henry Marshall smiled and waved at Harvard as if he were an old friend. Harvard could only shake his head cynically at the irony of it all. There went his half-million dollars, he thought. There went

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his new beginning, his chance at a new life, his opportunity to go back to his roots and make something reputable of himself. Of course, he knew he could go to John and William on bended knee, contrite, repentant, and they would take him back, finance his rehabilitation into respectability, but he could not bring himself to do that. With the half-million, he could have walked back in like a man, like a winner, with some pride left. The other way—well, he simply could not bring himself to do it.

And he had wanted it so badly, he thought as the Marshall entourage drove away. For the very first time, he had really, *really* wanted it.

As Harvard was finishing breakfast, a bellhop delivered a sealed envelope to him. Inside, on hotel stationery, was a handwritten note from Henry Marshall.

> Dear James,
>
> Adriana told me the truth about her "kidnapping." You could have threatened me with that fact last night, but you didn't. I admire you for that. When you run out of money again, my job offer still holds.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Henry Marshall

Included with the note was Henry Marshall's certified check for five hundred thousand dollars.

Later in the day, after he had checked out of the hotel, Harvard went to the concierge desk looking for Georgette.

"I am sorry, monsieur," said the person on duty, "but Georgette is off for the rest of the week. She and her fiancé suddenly decided to get married. They eloped to Paris."

On impulse, Harvard signed a credit-card advance for five thousand dollars and instructed that it be given anonymously to Georgette when she returned. "Monsieur is extremely generous," the duty concierge praised.

"Monte Carlo was very good to me," Harvard said. "I made a lot of money."

Smiling, his new life ahead of him, Harvard left for the airport.

The only flight Harvard could get to Chicago had a change of planes in London. During his two-hour layover, while strolling

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

idly around Heathrow, he happened to pass the British Air desk for commuter flights to Northern Ireland. Stopping, he stared intently at the schedule of flights, his eyes riveted, expression grave. After several moments, he walked up to the desk and purchased a seat on the next flight over to Belfast.

At the end of the business day that evening, Harvard was standing on the steps of Northern Ireland's Government House when a group of civil servants emerged. Among them was Harvard's old Notre Dame roommate, Tyrone Buchanan.

"Hello, Ty," said Harvard.

"Why, hello, Jimmy! This *is* a surprise."

"I can imagine. Have your people in Monaco told you what happened yet?"

Buchanan frowned. "My people in Monaco? I don't understand—"

"I think you do, Ty. It had to be you. You're the only one who knew I was staying at the Midland Hotel the other day. You're the only one who could have sent that panel truck after my taxi on the way to the airport."

Buchanan smiled tightly. "Quite the detective, aren't you, Jimmy?"

"How long have you been a member of the INF, Ty?"

"Since the day it started," Buchanan replied coldly. "I *founded* the organization, Jimmy. But you'll never be able to prove it."

"Won't I?" Harvard opened his coat. There was a miniature microphone clipped to his shirt pocket. "Did you get all that, gentlemen?" he asked, speaking into the microphone.

Turning, Harvard looked down the broad steps of Government House and saw Chief Warden Charnley and three other officers on their way up to get Buchanan.

"So long, Ty," Harvard said, and walked down the steps.

Late that night, Harvard was back at Heathrow. He had missed the last connection of the day to Chicago. It would be eight hours before there was another flight.

Walking outside into the chilly night, he turned up his collar in back and stood thinking about Georgette, probably making love in Paris, and Adriana, back safely with her father in suburban Chicago by now, and his brothers and their wives and children, all going about their lives in separate wings of the Harvard mansion.

And he thought of the four million dollars he had gambled away since receiving his inheritance. Thankfully, he would be able to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

make that back in his new life, having his stock in Harvard Mills again, helping his brothers run the business.

Shaking his head, he laughed softly at himself. What a losing streak he'd had! It was almost unimaginable. Yet it had happened, really happened. Four million!

Still, he reasoned, it *was* only a losing streak. They came along every once in a while and you just had to ride them out. A streak was just a streak; it could be broken.

A little black London taxi pulled to the curb in front of him. "Cab, guv'nor?" the driver asked.

Harvard smiled. Why not? After all, he had a certified check for half a million dollars in his pocket and eight hours to kill.

Getting into the taxi, he said, "Take me to the International Club. It's on Berkeley Square in Mayfair."

The taxi pulled out into the night toward London. In the backseat, Harvard felt the old thrill beginning. ●

CORPUS DELICIOUS

Cadaver, cadaver, what is thy name?
Were you just no-name, or sparkled with fame?
They cut off your fingers, and toes, and your head—
All we can tell is you're really quite dead.

Hunger pangs drove the team for a snack
To a hamburger stand that lay in the back.
One of the team had a horrible thought
And DNA-tested the burger he'd bought.

They arrested the owner and put him in jail
Soon joined by the team, so wan and so pale.
They'd eaten the evidence, right on the spot—
"Obstructing justice," the judge said, "That's what!"

By Peggy Wysong

Poem © 1997 Peggy Wysong
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE...

Models
BY KRISTINE RUSCH

Wake Up Little Suzie
BY ED GORMAN

The Man Who Got the Dirt
BY SIMON BRETT

Crack in a Crystal Ball
BY WILLIAM LINK

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 110, Nos. 3 & 4. Whole Nos. 673 & 674, September/October 1997. Published monthly except for a combined September/October double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $33.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649. © 1997 Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. USPS 523-610, ISSN 1054-8122. Dell GST: R123054108. For back issues, send your check for $5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite 1500, 251 Main Street, Stamford, CT 06901-2988. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add $2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

JANET HUTCHINGS
Editor

VARSHA MAHTANI
Editorial Assistant

MONICA GAIGE-ROSENSWEIG
Creative Director

SHIRLEY CHAN LEVI
Assistant Art Director

KATHLEEN HALLIGAN
Associate Manager,
Subsidiary Rights & Marketing

ROB SEIDEN
Manager, Contracts & Permissions

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Director of Newsstand Sales

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

CAROLE DIXON
Production Manager

PETER KANTER
Publisher

FRAN DANON
Editorial Director

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
DAVID GELLER PUBLISHER'S REP
(212) 682-1540

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

QUEEN/HITCHCOCK combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $4.80 per word—payable in advance ($72.00 minimum). Capitalized words 60¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue, please send order and remittance to Dell Magazines, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020, Attn: Carole Dixon.

ASTROLOGY

WITCHCRAFT! Harness its power! Free Protective Pentacle. Write: School, PO Box 297AN, Hinton, WV 25951.

AUTHORS

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK NOW! Your book can be produced and promoted by the leading subsidy book publisher. Send for free brochure: HP-5, Vantage Press, 516 W. 34th St., New York, NY 10001.

AGENT Looking for new authors. Send SASE to: GEM, 4717 Poe Road, Medina, Ohio 44256.

AUTHOR'S SERVICE

EDITING, REASONABLE RATES, any manuscript. 72144.3133@compuserve.com or http://home.inreach.com/editserv/ or ESEQ, 2455 Pinecrest Drive, Santa Rosa, CA 95403.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

FREE CATALOG Collectible and used mystery books. Dunn and Powell Books, Dept. DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, ME 04609-1714, dpbookss@acadia.net/www.dpbooks.com

FREE CATALOGS Collectible/used mysteries. Murder Is Served, 5273 Bittersweet Drive, Dayton, OH 45429. 937-438-0211.

FREE LISTS. Quality used paperbacks: mysteries, SF, gothics, westerns. (Please specify.) Steve Lewis, 62 Chestnut, Newington CT 06111.

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free Catalog! New and recycled detective fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, 513-242-7527.

HELP WANTED

EASY WORK! EXCELLENT PAY! Assemble Products At Home. Call Toll Free 1-800-467-5566 EXT. 766.

MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE

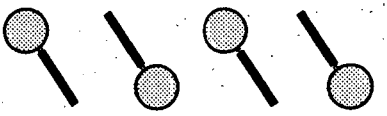
10th annual MURDER MYSTERY CRUISE, May 2, 1998. Seven day cruise to Bermuda abroad Norwegian Cruise Line's beautiful Norwegian Crown. Call CruiseWorks 800-876-6664.

PATENTING

FREE Invention Kit: Patent and market your new product idea! Call Concept Network 1-800-846-8368.

PUBLISHING

NEW AUTHORS
PUBLISH YOUR WORK
ALL SUBJECTS CONSIDERED
Fiction, Biography, Religious, Poetry, Children's
AUTHORS WORLDWIDE INVITED.
WRITE OR SEND YOUR MANUSCRIPT TO
MINERVA PRESS
2 OLD BROMPTON ROAD, LONDON SW7 3DQ, ENGLAND



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ALFRED HITCHCOCK AND ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINES

Combo Classified Advertising Order Form

MAIL TO

DELL MAGAZINES
attn: Carole Dixon
Classified Advertising Dept.
10th Floor
1270 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

15 WORDS MINIMUM
Only $72.00 for 15 Words or Less.
$4.80 Each Additional Word.
Capitalized Words Add $.60 per Word.

SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the 4th preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear:

PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE

Your Name _____

Firm (Name in Ad) _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

Phone _____ Date _____

Your Signature _____

Basic rate	$72.00
_____ Additional words at $4.80 each.	_____
_____ Capitalized words at $.60 each.	_____
Total amount for 1 ad	$ _____

15% Savings With 3 Consecutive Month Discount

a. Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $

b. Multiply total amount on above line by x .85 _____ x .85

c. Total amount for 3 ads $

$ _____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the next available issue(s)

Specify heading _____

FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET

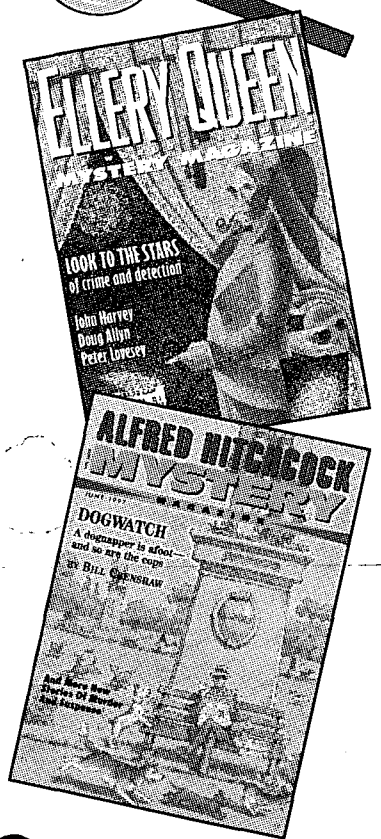
(1) $72.00	(2) $72.00	(3) $72.00	(4) $72.00	(5) $72.00
(6) $72.00	(7) $72.00	(8) $72.00	(9) $72.00	(10) $72.00
(11) $72.00	(12) $72.00	(13) $72.00	(14) $72.00	(15) $72.00
(16) $76.80	(17) $81.60	(18) $86.40	(19) $91.20	(20) $96.00
(21) $100.80	(22) $105.60	(23) $110.40	(24) $115.20	(25) $120.00
(26) $124.80	(27) $129.60	(28) $134 .40	(29) $139.20	(30) $144.00

HOW DO YOU COUNT WORDS? Name and address must be included in counting the number of words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word. City and state count as 1 word each. (Garden City, New York, counts as 2 words.) Zip codes are 1 word. (Mark). Holly, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020 count as 8 words.) Phone numbers are 1 word. Abbreviations such as COD, FOB, PO, USA, 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. PO Box 145 counts as 2 words.

PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO DELL MAGAZINES.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Twice the Murder and Mayhem



Double your reading pleasure with a subscription to both **Alfred Hitchcock** and **Ellery Queen!**

Each magazine brings you award-winning fiction from many of the top mystery writers of our time.

And now you can **save more than 25%** off the regular price while you enjoy the convenience of home delivery. You'll get a total of 24 issues (12 issues of each magazine) for only $49.97. ***You save $18.00!***

Call today to begin your subscriptions to **Alfred Hitchcock** and **Ellery Queen** at this special low rate.

To charge your order by phone, call toll-free, **1-800-333-3311**
Outside the USA: 303/678-0439

Or mail your order to:
Special Mystery Subscription Offer
P.O. Box 54625
Boulder, CO 80322-4625

If you already subscribe, you can still take advantage of this special low price. Be sure to mention you're currently a subscriber when you order.

Please allow 6 to 8 weeks for delivery of your first issue. We publish a double issue, which counts as two issues toward your subscription, of each magazine. Outside USA: Add $16 per year for shipping & handling (U.S. funds only, payable with order).

HF975

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

YOURS FREE!

LISE McCLENDON'S *Painted Truth*

If you enjoy fast-paced mystery thrillers, then you'll love **The Mystery Library!** To introduce you to this superb series, we'd like to send you a FREE COPY of *Painted Truth* by reader favorite Lise McClendon.

You'll get *Painted Truth* absolutely **FREE** when you take two more suspenseful mysteries for just 99¢—*The Iron Glove* by Ronald Tierney and *Deadly Admirer* by Christine Green.

These three books have a combined cover price of $14.97, but all you'll pay is 99¢! After receiving your books, if you don't wish to get any more, write "cancel" on the statement and return it with your 99¢ payment. **You'll be under no further obligation to buy anything!**

If you do not cancel, about a month later we'll send you 3 more books and bill you just $4.19 each plus 25¢ delivery*. You may return any shipment at our expense and cancel at any time, even after your first shipment. There is no minimum number of books to buy, no hidden extras! So go ahead—accept our special offer and find out how exciting The Mystery Library is!

...and get 2 more mystery novels for just 99¢!

THE MYSTERY LIBRARY™

YES, send me the three books! One is FREE and the other two are just 99¢. And please send my free Book Lite. I understand that I am under no obligation to purchase anything else and I may cancel at any time.

415 SPA A9EW

NAME (Please Print) _____

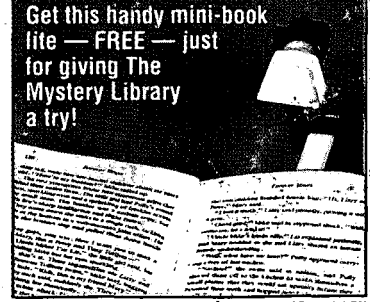
ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

Mail to: THE MYSTERY LIBRARY
P.O. BOX 9017 • BUFFALO, NY 14240–9017

SPECIAL FREE GIFT!

Get this handy mini-book lite — FREE — just for giving The Mystery Library a try!



COLOR MAY VARY

*Terms and prices subject to change without notice. Sales tax applicable in N.Y. Offer not valid to current Mystery Library subscribers. Offer limited to one per household. Offer only available in the U.S.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED